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Ferrari power, Burmester sound: The new Purosangue

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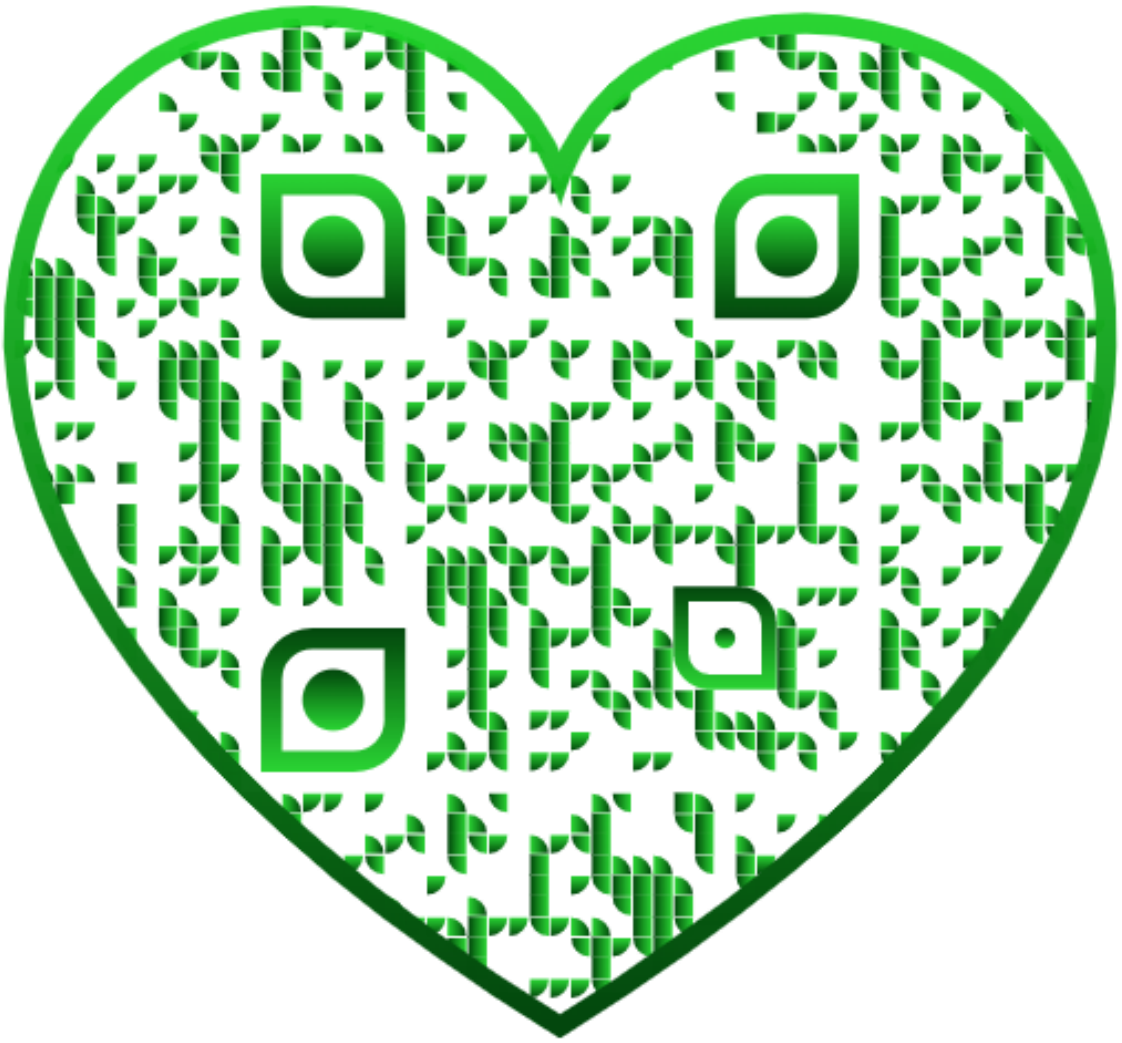

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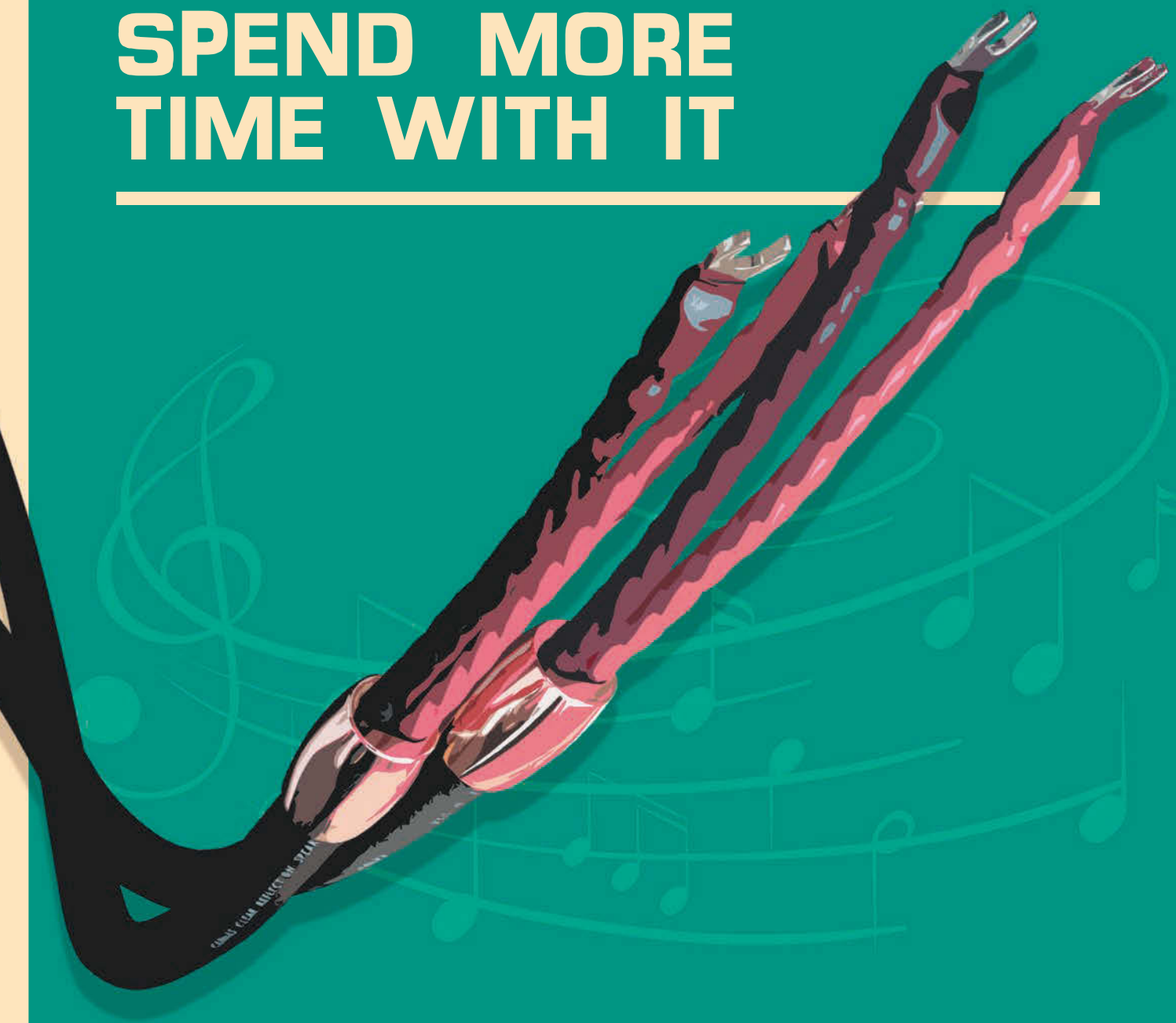

LISTEN LONGER, WITH CARDAS.

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editorial

In recent years, it has become fine for people to embrace their inner nerd in almost every hobby or interest. Except audio. In audio, it's still unacceptable in some circles for someone to spend money on good audio without being pillaried for being at once a credulous sap and obsessed by 'bling'. And I'm not sure why we are the exception.

Here's what I mean. British actor Henry Cavill (best known for playing Superman and his roles in *The Witcher* and *Mission Impossible - Fallout*) is known as an avid gamer and unashamed fan of Warhammer 40,000. He has spoken about this extensively in chat shows recently. Only a few years ago, his fanatacism over painting plastic spacemen would have been met with scorn and ridicule, but now it's met with genuine interest, even among non-fans.

Similarly, Rod Stewart has been a life-long model railway enthusiast, with a 23' × 124' layout he calls the Three Rivers City, based on New York Central and Pennsylvania railroads and a second layout based on the East Coast Main Line railway in the UK. His layouts have been featured several times in *Railway Modeller* and *Model Railroader* magazines, but it's only recently that the mainstream media was drawn to his passion in a sympathetic manner.

Thanks to both *The Big Bang Theory* and *Stranger Things*, Dungeons and Dragons has seen both a reemergence and a mainstream legitimacy it lacked a generation ago.

Even cosplay – so often the focus of derision by trolls worldwide – has become more publically accepted. Attending a Comicon used to be dismissed as a kind of holding pen for nerds and while it still has some negative connotations among the mainstream, it's treated with far greater neutrality today.

Sadly, the same acceptance has not made it to audio in quite the same manner. Yes, thanks to the lockdowns, the interest has returned, and we've seen a younger generation attending audio shows across Europe in the last year. This is great. But proudly displaying your new high-end cable on the Internet can still hurt.

Although the trolls will claim their ire is about protecting people from spending money unnecessarily, that doesn't ring true. All these other hobbies can prove punishingly expensive, too.

I think it's time to set aside our personal dislikes in the hobby and be more welcoming to a new generation of music loving audio enthusiast. That doesn't mean 'mansplaining' but it does mean it's time to stop being audio's gate-keeper.

ERRATA: hi-fi+ published a review of the excellent Karan Acoustics Master Collection PHONOb in Issue 217. However, in some parts of the review, we inadvertantly called this the 'Master Reference' instead of 'Master Collection'. Our apologies for the confusion this may have caused.

Alan Sircom • editor@hifiplus.com

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Decisions, decisions

I've recently embraced the modern world, having taken my first steps into streaming audio. This was not done that willingly; my wife and I recently down-sized and my wall of CDs didn't make the cut... so my wife informs me. So, I have a much smaller collection of CDs and a new-found interest in streaming.

I did consider ripping all my discs, but after ripping about 20 of them, I realised that life is way too short to rip discs. So, I bit the bullet and signed up to Tidal, and the results are better than I expected.

Spotify and Apple Music did nothing for me, although I note with interest that Spotify is planning a 'hi-fi' lossless service. But for now, they don't come up to the standard I had with my Marantz CD player.

However, my question is what else can and what will be capable of reaching the sound quality standards of a 1990s CD player, and does this ultimately mean we've taken a step backwards in sound quality?

Dominic Skinner, via email

Alongside Tidal, Qobuz offers outstanding sound quality for both its streamed and downloaded music content. Often, the sound quality is at least as good and sometimes better than Tidal's own output. The musical range of the two is somewhat different.

Letter of the month wins the AudioQuest cable of their choice up to £250!

Both AudioQuest and hi-fi+ are passionate about music and the sound it makes. We know what makes a great audio experience and what makes it better. Most modern audio equipment is good, but with the right attitude, right advice and the right components, the sound it delivers can move from 'good' to 'great' to 'awesome'.

AudioQuest deals with a lot of queries regarding good audio systems because almost everything in audio is connected with a cable! The company has amassed a wealth of information on a range of topics in audio, both in general terms and with a team comprising keen, specialist audio experts.

Which is why we've teamed up with the good folks at AudioQuest to bring that expertise to bear in our letter of the month, and the lucky recipient will receive a £250 AudioQuest cable (or cables) of their choice!

Additionally, many record companies offer high-resolution download services, allowing you to purchase and store your music on a local server. This is often considered the best way to make music sound excellent in the home. This does mean you might have both music stored on hard disk at home and streamed from far-away server farms, but this is more of a question of collection management. You don't list the equipment you now use in place of your Marantz CD player, but if it is listed as 'Roon Ready', I'd strongly consider getting the full Roon package as it makes organising and managing your music so much easier than relying on a Music Player on a laptop screen..

And now for the deeper philosophical question; have we taken a step backwards? Looking back over the history of the audio world, people have been saying this for almost as long as there have been recordings. Certainly, around 95 years ago, people were bemoaning the introduction of electrical recording techniques as it lacks the immediacy of people playing into a horn. The LP, the birth of stereo, CD, downloading and streaming have all been criticised for not sounding as good as the media they 'replace'.

However, I think we're still learning with streaming and there's still a lot more performance to be drawn out of such systems. So... watch this space!

Robert Hay, AudioQuest »

Please send your hi-fi+ Incoming email to editor@hifiplus.com

I think this has resulted in so many great British companies now being BINOs British in Name Only.

Buy British or bye, British!

Where possible, I prefer to buy from British hi-fi companies to support our national business. What continues to surprise me is how few British people in audio fly the flag today!

I think this has resulted in so many great British companies now being BINOs – British In Name Only. I can remember a time where British brands dominated, and the Tottenham Court Road in London was full of hi-fi shops selling British designed and built products like Garrard, Leak, Quad and Wharfedale. All of those companies are now either owned by foreign investors or have been bought up and are now owned and made in China.

We should pull together to support those few truly British brands we still have left, like Linn, Michell, Rega and ProAc. So, I find it especially offensive when all the British-based magazines barely cover these brands in favour of foreign companies. I guess I must be in the minority these days because the only magazine that routinely covered British hi-fi went out of business last year. However I still maintain that if we don't support these last surviving British brands, we'll lose audio technology forever.

'John Bull', via email

It is difficult to focus too heavily on exclusively British brands, in part because there are so few of them, and also because some change their product lines at a glacial pace; we're finally looking at the first Michell product in years; not because we prefer to focus on brands made outside the UK, but because it's the first new product from the company in ages.

In addition, most surviving UK-based audio magazines leverage the language; English is the first or second language in many parts of the world and we strive to bring the best in audio wherever it springs from to the world at large. As a truly global magazine, were we simply focused on UK-based brands, we'd be accused of being parochial on the international scene. Instead, by including UK-based brands in our mix, we put those brands in front of new 'eyes' and therefore help build an export trade for such companies.

Our move toward a more 'metropolitan' audio world does preclude some of the larger audio devices that we currently cover, and if there's one thing British audio brands do well, it's sweet-sounding smaller systems, so don't count the British out yet!

Ed.

Big is beautiful!

Your editorial of Issue 217 worried me. I read your magazine precisely because it covers the equipment that I will never own and never even be able to fit into my living room. I don't want the magazine to go down-market!

We like reading about toys we will never get to play with. Sure, the stuff you can buy is fine and of course you need to review the real-world stuff, but the really big, crazy equipment is what keeps people coming back for more. Do you really think all those readers of exotic car magazines can afford a new Ferrari every year? Of course not, but they want to read about Ferraris while they are driving round in their Abarths.

Gary McNally, via email

I wouldn't worry too much; we're not going 'down-market,' or even 'less expensive' necessarily; we're going 'smaller'. We're taking a more 'metropolitan' approach that suits people who don't have dedicated listening rooms the size of small European principalities in their back garden. This will have an influence on price point, as there aren't that many £300,000 two-way stand-mount loudspeakers, but our cut-off point remains 'virtually limitless.'

We will also continue to cover some of the big-ticket projects (like the Wilson Audio Alexx V in this issue), but just not to the same degree. For more extensive coverage of 'estate' sized equipment, we politely recommend our sister title, *The Absolute Sound*, who have a team of reviewers that do have listening rooms the size of Lichtenstein.

Balancing the output of a magazine is difficult. Doubly so when that magazine strives to have an international voice because what might work in one country will not automatically work in others. To accommodate music lovers who might have a room 12' × 16' and those with rooms 24' × 32' or more is almost impossible without disenfranchising someone. This is why we decided to make the most of both magazines.

Ed.

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Purosangue: Ferrari power, Burmester sound

Pete Collingwood-Trewin

Ferrari's new Purosangue, is not 'simply' another supercar; it's a new chapter for the car marque. Since the brand's launch in 1947, Ferrari has become synonymous with high-performance two-door cars. The Purosangue (prices start at £312,845/$398,350) bucks this trend as it becomes their first production model with four doors. It's also the company's first Luxury Mid-Sized car; I'd hesitate to describe it as an 'SUV' in the same way I'd hesitate to describe a Patek Philippe Chronograph Complication as 'a stopwatch'. It's a Ferrari... just with four doors.

However, it is clear that the Ferrari chiefs decided it was time to dip their toes into the Luxury Mid-Sized market, and I'd suggest they have jumped straight in with perfect grace and beauty. The team in Maranello are, rightly, incredibly proud of this new venture.

I had the opportunity to join the international press on a test drive high up in the Dolomite Mountains in Italy. While more expert voices in the car review world will talk at length about the driving experience (in short – fantastic!), we'll concentrate on its outstanding audio made by Burmester Audiosysteme.

Under the sleek bonnet/hood is a V12 engine at the front, with the transmission at the rear. While very different to the mid-engined mount seen in most Ferraris, this helps the designers balance the Purosangue to optimise performance. The car has a top speed of 192 mph (310 kph) and boasts 725hp; this is a supercar that seats four in comfort.

Driving settings

The Ferrari Purosangue's adaptive suspension technology has four settings – 'Sport', 'Comfort', 'Wet', and 'Ice'. In addition, each of these has sub-settings. This car is versatile; it could be used for a family vacation – to drive into the mountains to ski or cycle. It even has options for a bike and ski rack. The 'Comfort' setting removes the bumps from the drive to a point where you feel you are floating above the tarmac. 'Sport,' however, is a different matter. Select 'Sport, Hard' and you feel every single stone and bump in the surface, and you are inately connected – almost bonded – to the car itself.

With an eight-speed auto gearbox, the car can purr or roar depending on your bent. And roar it does! The event consisted of some 25 international journalists with around 10 cars between us. Not only was it glorious to be in the car and hear the engine roar as we climbed the mountain roads, but also to hear the other cars' engines echoing throughout the mountain range was very satisfying, although perhaps not so much for the locals!

Interior – the Ferrari Lounge

The Ferrari team were keen to portray that their vision for this car was to create a lounge within the vehicle. No longer do rear passengers have to feel cramped, or as though the rear seats were a bonus. The Purosangue offers ample comfort in the rear. The majority of the interior – including the seats – are made from 68% 'Post-consumer recycled polyester.' This material is developed by Italian firm Alcantara, which has worked with many luxury brands around the world. It is immediately clear from the touch that this is a super high-quality material despite the 'polyester' label. It's far removed from the artificial leather interiors of old.

Options galore

The rear section has two seats with a comfortable middle armrest with wireless charging capabilities and temperature

controls. All seats have massage functionality and heating capability options. Other interior features include carbon fibre trims dotted throughout the vehicle. The front passenger has a touch screen to control non-driving settings including the Burmester system.

There is an optional carbon-fibre roof – to reduce weight – or a glass panoramic roof which has an electrically adjustable opacity.

As you would expect with a car of this calibre, there is a huge list of optional extras from Carbon Side Skirts or Carbon Fibre spoilers to Gold brake callipers.

That being said, the Ferrari Purosangue team have made two significant decisions with this new model. First, they do not include a GPS navigation system. They acknowledge that Apple Maps and Google Maps are better, and more up-to-date than any bespoke product they can produce, so through CarPlay the maps are more accurate.

The second decision is to remove the option of an upgraded sound system. Instead, all Ferrari Purosangues will have the high-performance 21-speaker Burmester system installed as standard.

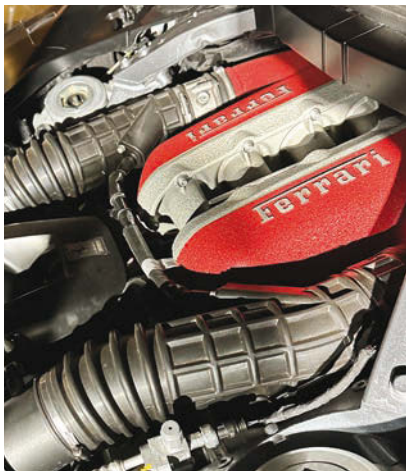
Both decisions are a bold departure for Ferrari, as other models in the brand's range have featured an integrated 'infotainment' system option complete with navigation, under the Ferrari Genuine banner.

Sounds great!

Burmester Audiosysteme's automotive division has already chalked up successes with systems designed for Bugatti, Mercedes-Benz and Porsche, but adding Ferrari and its bold new Purosangue is a very big feather in the Berlin-based company's cap.

In fact, I would argue that it's a cooperative venture that works for both sides. Ferrari has access to a level of top-class automotive audio and acoustic engineering that would take decades to create in-house. Meanwhile, Burmester adds another of the most highly sought-after car marques in history to its portfolio. »

> I have a theory that cars are the best place to listen to an audio system. A car is a fixed and known space.



» I have a theory that cars are the best place to listen to an audio system. A car is a fixed and known space – the acoustic engineers and designers know that except for variables like road noise and the number of people in the car, parameters like size, volume, and materials will not change (and even those variables are 'known'; squeezing 10 people into a four-seat car is unlikely). This is very much in contrast to a personal listening space: no two are alike, and that space cannot be predicted by acoustic engineers.

The Ferrari Purosangue's Burmester system comprises over 1,400 watts of amplification, driving 21 speakers, including a subwoofer with it's own 400 watt amplifier. Interestingly, the system features ribbon tweeters; this is a world first, as these have never been used in production vehicles before.

Testing

The main driving day started with a technical briefing. The majority of the journalists were already familiar with the standard Ferrari interface, so the briefing touched on additions and changes in the Purosangue. I wasn't so familiar with that interface and I left the briefing feeling flummoxed!

We were briefed and given a route with various checkpoints along the way and a meeting point for lunch. It was probably a good hour into the driving before the sound system was switched on, as the initial fun was listening to the engine making its own music as we hurtled through tunnels and around hairpin bends at high altitudes.

Given the intensity of the driving experience, it's useful that the passenger touchscreen enables complete control of the Burmester preset system, as the driver might be otherwise engaged.

The 10.2 inch screen offers many options from Equaliser to Balance as you would expect; however, there is one setting marked 'VIP – Seat' that gives the option to choose any seat and have the music focussed on that position – this tightens up the soundstage and creates a sonic 'sweet »

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> Vocals are crystal clear on all settings, although perhaps a little muffled on 'Comfort'. This preset acts to soften the sound to create a background listening experience.

» spot' in one of the four seats. This has been used to great effect in previous Burmester systems in Mercedes-Benz and Mercedes-Maybach S-Class cars because the driver is unlikely to be the VIP. This Digital Signal Processing option is arguably even more important in the Ferrari Purosangue, as the VIP listener could be any one of the four people seated in the car.

Burmester has created five presets for the Ferrari Purosangue – 'Surround', '3D Surround', 'Stage Plus', 'Live' and 'Comfort'. Each of these settings involves making specific tweaks to the soundstage – I noted that vocals are crystal clear on all settings, although perhaps a little muffled on 'Comfort'. This preset acts to soften the sound to create a background listening experience.

By far the best for me was the '3D Surround' – the sense of being fully immersed in the music was created, not that you were sitting in the auditorium, rather that you were on stage in the midst of the orchestra, but perfectly balanced. The sound designers have created these presets with hours of research and development. I only hope that a Purosangue owner will explore them to enhance their listening on journeys. That fabulous engine noise might sing a siren's song, but there's a lot more to enjoy sonically too.

HMI (Human Machine Interface)

Without a doubt, the Ferrari has one of the most (necessarily) complex driving interfaces I have experienced. Even the steering wheel has a touch-sensitive area, enabling you to scroll through the various options available to the driver. That said, it was 'somewhat' clunky and not that touch-sensitive. It took two hours of driving before I could find the steering wheel volume control. At the end of the driving sessions, there were still several buttons left completely unexplored. OK, so some of that was the fear was that one of these would inject an extra 300hp to the already highly excitable V12! In reality, any owner will likely find these features will fall naturally to hand very quickly.

Regardless, the Purosangue brings Ferrari performance to the Luxury Mid-Sized car world. If there is such a thing as an 'Everyday Ferrari', it's the Purosangue. Normally, when dealing with supercars, the car audio has been almost an afterthought, but with this powerful, flexible and extremely well-balanced Burmester system, it becomes an important part of the whole driving experience. Handing the keys back was a real wrench! +

Thanks to Olaf Sturm, of i-fidelity for being a great copilot!

BURMESTER'S IN-CAR, IN-HOTEL SOUND

The Ferrari team had set up a dedicated area of the hotel to explore some of the features of the car. There was a partners area, which featured Alcantara and one for Burmester. The Alcantara area showcased the seats and materials available and we experienced a talk emphasising the sustainability of this remarkable recycled material used in the car interior.

The Burmester area was a soundproofed room featuring a 21 speaker system (20 in-wall loudspeakers and a subwoofer) with Burmester's electronics. This system was itself valued in the region of €150,000 and was something of a revelation for car journalists entirely unused to what really top-notch high-end audio in the home can do.

Granted, this was no ordinary audio system for no ordinary audio recording. This was an epic room with a somewhat over the top system! The Burmester team had created an experience – a journey. The purpose was to simulate a ride in the Purosangue, starting with being picked up from your front door, to driving through the streets and entering a race track. Each element had been meticulously recorded and played back through this stunning sounding room. It's the next best thing to driving the car!

The audio journalists at the event were taken aback by the performance of the Ferrari itself, but this was one of those times where the car journalists were left speechless. The people from Burmester had to prize a few of them off the seats because they all wanted to hear some of their own music through this powerful and impressive custom install system in the heart of a beautiful hotel high up in the Dolomites.

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Steven Stone Assembles a Reference-Level Nearfield Audio System

When the Sony SA-Z1 speaker system I reviewed in *The Absolute Sound* issue 312 was packed up I looked at the empty space left behind and wondered, "How close to that reference-level sound can I get from other more conventional components in the same limited space?" And so, my trip down the rabbit hole with mini-sized desktop-based stereo systems began…and multiple months in, things are getting interesting with my tabletop time machine.

The goal

When I reviewed the Sony SA-Z1 audio system I wrote, "The Sony system creates a three-dimensional soundfield that envelops the listener in the same way a finely-tuned room-based system can, but it does it in a much more confined space." The spatial precision of the SA-Z1's soundstage presentation was state of the art. With small groups, such as my recordings from the Rockygrass Academy workshops, each individual player was precisely placed, with clearly defined dimensions and height and width cues. When I played a large orchestra recording or a big pop production, the soundstage width, height, and depth rendition followed the dictates of the recording with superb accuracy. If the recording was wide, so was the SA-Z1's soundstage, but with mono recordings the image seemed no wider than a small coin. That is the kind of performance I wanted to duplicate.

There was one sonic parameter where I had no doubt I could beat the Sony system with a more conventional one—its mid and low bass capabilities. The Sony system had no subwoofer or provisions for adding one, while every system I've assembled in the same space has had a subwoofer. Mid and low bass were far more present with the subwoofer dialed in correctly than with the Sony system. »

> Because this was a personal project, I did not approach any 'usual suspect' manufacturers for loaner cables.

The environment

The mid-80s, solid-oak, trestle-legged table in my workroom measures exactly 48 inches wide by 48 inches deep. It resides in the corner, near a window, in a nine by thirteen-and-a-half-foot room with a nine-foot ceiling. For my experiment, the table stayed in the same spot it was in when I reviewed the Sony SA-Z1 system, except I added substantial amounts of acoustic treatment, including ten Auralex 4"-thick, 16" × 16" Studiofoam squares, thirty Amazon-sourced. 2"-thick, 12" × 12" foam squares, six corner wedges, and a Persian rug on the desktop itself to kill midrange "table bounce." After trying several different speaker stands, I settled on Rockville RHT8G desktop speaker stands, sourced from Amazon, and then modified them with acoustic damping material to fill their hollow centre columns.

The basic idea was to kill all the early upper-frequency and midrange reflections in the listening environment, and then dial in the bass via speaker placement and subwoofer settings. It was to be a miniature quasi-dead-end/live-end listening environment. Obviously, this is a lot more work, mostly trial and error, than simply plunking down the Sony system according to Sony's terse instructions.

Some audiophiles might think, "Isn't this system merely a big headphone?" No, this system is far more like a small room than a big headphone. The soundstage is spread in front, just like in a room-based system, not above or inside your head as with headphones.

The first couple of months I had all the electronics situated between the loudspeakers, which allowed for short loudspeaker cable runs of only one metre and line-level cables as short as a half metre. The problems with this were threefold: First, the metal electronics boxes introduced a diffraction issue—sound reflected off all those nice shiny surfaces. Second, the component locations limited speaker placement. And third, the electronics were in the highest sound pressure area where they were most likely to be affected by high sound pressure levels.

So, after realising the error of my ways, I moved all the electronics to a cobbled-together mini-equipment shelf system consisting of two no-brand, low cost metal monitor stands sourced from Amazon. I gaffer-taped the two stands in such a way as to make a very nice two-tier stand, that put the top tier ten inches off the ground. This was the perfect height, as I could easily reach a preamp's volume control from my seated listening position. It also meant I had to replace all those nice short cable runs. Now I had a two-metre connection between preamplifier and power amplifier and a three-metre run to the subwoofer. At least the half metre line-level connection between the DAC and preamplifier remained the same. I also repurposed two short, metal, On-Stage SMS-4500 speaker stands that were a bit too high to use with loudspeakers on my tabletop as power-amp and AC-power-filter-box stands under the table.

Because this was a personal project, I did not approach any 'usual suspect' manufacturers for loaner cables, but instead sourced all my cabling from the same overseas vendors as most of the audio components. I tried several radically different cabling configurations, including flat strand, braided, and coaxial designs; they all worked, but some performed at a higher level than others with particular configurations of gear.

The setup

Noise and hum are the enemies of all things audio. The goal was to assemble a system that was quiet enough that you could put your ear right up to the tweeter and hear nothing—or, at worst, hear nothing more than a gentle distant hiss. Hums, buzzes, whines, or anything else that made it seem as if the music emerged from behind or in front of a curtain of additive electronic noise was simply unacceptable in an extremely nearfield system. I can't begin to count the number of times I've connected together a promising combination of preamplifier and power amplifier only to be greeted by some form of additive base-level noise. For me, that's the sound of system failure.

While specifications are good starting points for finding components that are quiet enough for nearfield use, even seeing 100dB signal-to-noise figures doesn't guarantee background silence. Unfortunately, powerline noise has a major influence on overall noise levels at your loudspeakers, and that's something that no manufacturer can control. Also, hum generated by the transformer and physically transmitted to the power amplifier chassis by contact proved to be a problem with some of the low-power amps I tried. Good luck finding any builder or electrician who tests, measures, or even notices whether an amplifier exhibits any transformer-generated/mains-generated hum!

A major advantage of a nearfield system is that you can employ lower output-power amplifiers with medium sensitivity (86–89dB) speakers that would require double or triple the output power to reach the same SPLs at the listening position in a room-based system. I've used

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> Some of the highest-fidelity results were from 15-to-25W solid-state Class A or minimalist, Texas Instrument based chip power amps.

everything from 8W single-ended tube amps to 150W transistor amps in this nearfield system. Some of the highest-fidelity results were from 15-to-25W solid-state Class A or minimalist, Texas Instrument-based chip power amps mated with simple single-input Class A preamplifiers. There's something that sounds right about an audio signal without the crossover distortion of a Class A/B circuit.

My signal chain for this system was simple. I used digital files from Tidal, Qobuz, and my own NAS played via Roon. The Roon endpoint was a Raspberry P4B running Diet-Pi software, with its USB output connected to a Topping D-70 and an iFi Audio Zen DAC Signature. Depending on the preamplifier, I used either the Topping and iFi's balanced or single-ended connections, and except in rare cases the volume control was maxed-out for a full 2V output via single-ended connectors, and 4V via balanced ones. I isolated the Raspberry Pi's digital-power-supply wall-wart from the other component's power supplies as a prophylactic measure, since these kinds of digital power supplies can be sources of AC noise for the rest of the system.

The parade of gear

You've probably noticed that, so far, I haven't mentioned much of the gear I was using. This kind of a "survey" article is usually fertile ground for dropping seeds of manufacturer links hither and thither. But I must come clean: Much of the gear I used and listened to in this system was from Chinese sources. It's stuff that is not yet being imported by any established distributors and is therefore completely unsupported. In good conscience, I can't recommend (or even mention) gear that an average consumer can't easily purchase and can't expect support from its creators when it fails. That kind of gear is best reserved for audiophiles who have a gambling streak and some technical chops. And while I've never dropped a single dime in the slots at Las Vegas during all my years of attending CES, I could not resist the allure of some attractive reimaginings of classic high-performance circuits from Chinese hi-fi builders. Notice that I wrote "builders" not "manufacturers." Many of the most interesting Chinese audio products are assembled by enthusiasts from readily available parts, including completely populated circuit boards, transformers, and chassis. I can't tell you how many times I've seen certain popular chassis or boards used for slightly different designs from various shops.

So, I took a budget of several thousand (in my case, approaching US$3k, and still counting; the figure would be broadly similar in Sterling and Euros) and bought samples of eight different preamplifiers, both tubed and solid-state, six different power amplifiers, two power conditioners, and enough different power, line-level, and digital cabling to wire the entire system several times over. Most of the electronics I purchased were in ½- or ¾-sized chassis (hence qualifying as mini). I concentrated on these components because with full-sized electronics, especially power amplifiers, the shipping costs from China are much higher due to greater weight and larger sized boxes. Also, the heavy stuff coming from China has a history of experiencing far more shipping damage. I even got a bunch of cool under-gear footers that featured a triple ball-bearing contact point, textured rubber feet, and a rubber-damped centre to put under the preamp, DAC, power amplifier, and power filter boxes for better ventilation, isolation, and that essential "stay in place and don't move" capacity.

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“The first challenge was to clean up my generally rotten power, which varies dramatically in voltage while delivering copious amounts of noise and hash.

The results (so far)

Where has all this building and unbuilding, hooking and unhooking got me? In the end, it’s brought many hours of satisfied listening. But that doesn’t help you much. What I discovered (or rediscovered) was that, unfortunately for audio compulsives, every component choice in an audio system can and does make a sonic difference (cue Billie Eilish, “duh”).

The first challenge was to clean up my generally rotten power, which varies dramatically in voltage while delivering copious amount of noise and hash as measured by two different noise-measurement devices. I’ve found PS Audio’s AC-noise-reduction components, including the Quintet, Dectet, and their active power stations, extremely effective, but I wanted to see if I could find something from overseas that would also work. On my second try, I found a device with two separate channels of transformer-filtered power that delivered quiet results. Since it only had four plugs (I need as many as seven sometimes), I added another all-metal AC-filter box from the same source and connected it via a short half-metre power cable to supply the extra two outlets I needed.

I violated my attempts to assemble a completely Sino-centric system when I got to speakers. Even I don’t have sufficiently steely gamblers’ instincts for choosing loudspeakers based on a couple of pix and some less-than-complete printed specifications, so I stayed with loudspeakers I knew. So far, I’ve used five different loudspeakers in my mini-system, all two-way designs except for one, all mated with an M&K Sound MX-700 subwoofer (discontinued) or Omega subwoofer. The M&K subwoofer has a rather unusual design with one 8** woofer firing downwards, while the other next to it fires upward into the cabinet. Also, this subwoofer was designed to be situated next to a wall, which was ideal for my setup. The Omega is a down firing 8** that also allows for close wall placement. My loudspeaker entourage included the Audience 1+1 loudspeakers V3, Silverline Minuet Supreme, ATC SC-7 II, Role Audio Kayak, and the discontinued Omega Mini-Me. None reach ‘OMG’ prices, topping out at around two and a half grand. The Silverline Minuet Supremes and Omega Min-Me’s were the most efficient, so they got the most time with lower-powered amplifiers.

How good can a tabletop system be?

Of course, the question on anyone’s mind who’s read this far is, “How close to the sound of your main room reference system did the mini-system get?” The answer is it’s extremely close, but not quite there yet.

With the very best combinations of gear I’ve cobbled together so far I’ve got this system to a point where it performs at a level equal to my main system in lateral focus, bass extension, speed, inner detail, and micro-dynamics, but there are still some aspects that are not yet up to reference level. Getting the same openness, both in the character of the bass and in the spaces between instruments or vocalists, has been challenging. There is still something in the way of electronic ‘stuff’ present, where my main system delivers a void of empty space.

An area where I succeeded in beating the Sony system was the size of the sweet spot. With the Sony it was possible to move my head enough, while chair-dancing, for the image to shift slightly. With my current desktop configuration, I can dance to the music without boogying out of the sweet spot. A prime cut for this dance fever was BTS’ release ‘Butter,’ which has a huge soundstage and a dynamic bass line that could tax a system not up to handling its dynamic requirements, but it hangs together beautifully on this nearfield system.

Easily the most pernicious recurring sonic problem I had with the system is taming the lower midrange and upper bass so that it does not get huffy or thuddy, even with the subwoofer turned off. Because they have the most bass capability of the loudspeakers I used, the ATC SC-7 II had the most issues in this respect. Combined with a 1969 Hood design Class A power amp the ATC’s could whomp you like a Harry Potter’s magic tree. Fun, but not too real…

And while we’re on the subject of fun, I must add that playing mix and match with multiple, modestly priced components has been a blast, as well as educational in terms of what components I could successfully mate, and not mate, with other components. The system has kept me amused, and the project itself kept me more than a little bit sane as it’s at least rooted in real-world prices.

I’m planning on continuing to refine this nearfield system. I want to try some more sensitive loudspeaker designs and a several more preamplifier and low-power amplifiers. Perhaps, editors willing, in six or nine months I’ll bring you up to date of how the system has progressed, and maybe, just maybe, begin naming names in terms of my favourite signal-chain component combinations…but first, I should paraphrase Harry Pearson, *The Absolute Sound’s* founder, “I must fully explore the full measure of the system’s potential greatness.” All the while, having fun, too. +

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Naim NSC 222, NPX 300 and NAP 250 streaming preamp/power supply/power amplifier

Jason Kennedy

Fifty years is a good innings for a hi-fi company in today's competitive market. Naim has reached that milestone this year and is marking the occasion with the New Classic series, which replaces the Classic series that was introduced 20 years ago. Don't underestimate the style factor; Naim may have been making some fairly shiny boxes in its Uniti range but for most of its 50 year tenure, its core products have been fairly plain looking devices; almost hairshirt by the standards of the high end. The first stirrings of this transition were seen in the Statement amplifiers nine years ago and the creator of that look, Simon Matthews, is also responsible for New Classic, his swansong for Naim.

New Classic has been launched with the three products under consideration here; the NSC 222 preamplifier/streamer/DAC, the NPX 300 optional power supply for that product, and the NAP 250 power amplifier. This last name has been in the Naim range since 1975, in many ways it is the definitive Naim power amplifier, increasing in power over the years to today's 100W design. It inhabits a special place in the pantheon of Naim amps and was last revised in 2015 with the DR upgrade, a trickle down from the Statement S1. In New Classic form the NAP 250 is specified to deliver 100 Watts from each of its two channels.

The NSC 222 has no direct antecedent in the Naim range, the nearest it has come to this product type is the NAC-N 272 but that was phased out several years ago and was not in the same price or performance league. The NSC 222 has both digital and analogue inputs as well as an MM phono stage, on top of this it's a fully fledged streamer that's capable of playing from servers and USB sticks as well as a whole host of streaming services such as Tidal Connect and Qobuz. It's fully up to date with regard to wireless streaming too, accepting Chromecast, Airplay 2 and Bluetooth in its preferable aptX form. The inputs can be trimmed so that all sources have the same broad volume level and digital inputs can be adjusted for lip sync, which would suggest a predilection for AV applications but this is not backed up with an HDMI ARC input.

The volume control has the same styling as that on the Statement preamplifier and it turns out that the similarity is more than skin deep. This is not a potentiometer such as you'll find on the majority of Naim's past preamplifiers, but an optical encoder for a resistor network. And rather than having 100 resistors for a 100dB range Steve Sells has combined coarse and fine ladders to give 1dB steps using relays and a processor to select appropriate combinations. This tech is a direct trickle down from Statement and far more advanced than we've seen from many brands. It means that the output impedance doesn't vary and that there's no need for the knob to be motorised, the level is shown on the display regardless whether you change it with the app, remote or the actual and quite stiff rotary controller.

All the controls for the NSC 222 are available on the Focal & Naim app including volume and input selection; most are replicated on the handset that's supplied with this component but input selection requires scrolling through the options rather than going straight to the desired one. Unused inputs can be turned off to speed up your remote scrolling experience. It has four S/PDIF type digital inputs (coax and optical) and two analogue ones, albeit one uses DIN for legacy Naim components. Meanwhile, the phono input will be of use to anyone with an MM cartridge fitted to their turntable. It would have been nice to see an MC option but the sensitivity to noise of such low level signals means having one onboard would be a compromise. Word on the street has it that there will be a New Classic series phono stage coming soon.

Numbers, numbers

The DAC is specced to cope with a maximum of 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128. Naim, as ever, does not play the numbers game but uses converter chips that sound good rather than have the most impressive specs; an entirely laudable approach. »

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> The latest NAP 250 has a conventional pair of balanced inputs, making it compatible with pretty well any preamplifier on the planet.

One of the more controversial aspects of the NSC 222 is that it does not have a DIN output alongside the RCA sockets. Instead there is a pair of XLR connections with a matching pair of Naim's own XLR terminated cables in the box (with plastic plugs for sound quality reasons). The output is not, however, balanced in the differential sense but pseudo- or impedance balanced. Naim claims that this delivers the noise cancelling benefits of balanced connection but avoids the need for precisely matched transmitter and receiver circuits at either end; if there are timing differences between the pairs this will impair timing overall. This approach also means that signal level is the same as for the single-ended RCA outputs which is useful when bi-amping.

Unlike its NAP 250 DR predecessor, which had a single XLR input for a Naim-style connection to the preamplifier, the latest NAP 250 has a conventional pair of balanced inputs. This makes it compatible with most preamplifiers on the planet. It also has a form of trigger connection that uses an optical cable that's usefully supplied in the box, this means you can turn the whole system on with one button, and that button can even be on the app. All this ease of use must be a shock to the traditional Naim enthusiast but it won't be long before it's considered a necessity. The speaker cable terminals will reassure the faithful that all has not changed, these remain 4mm sockets to keep metalwork at a minimum. Naim even supply a pair of plugs for connecting to them which is a handy.

Chilling in the bike shed

Under the lid the NAP 250 still has DR (discrete regulator) tech and a substantial toroidal transformer, it's also based on the same circuitry but differs from the NAP 250 DR by offering 100W rather than 80W. This has been achieved by adding an extruded 'bike shed' section through the casework with a small seven speed fan at the back, this fan will only turn on under extreme conditions but stops the amplifier cutting out under heavy loads. Naim use fans on most of their bigger amps for the same reason but this is the first NAP 250 to have one.

The NSC 222 was hooked up to a Melco N10 server via a Network Acoustics Muon filter and the English Electric 8Switch, and powered by the NPX 300 power supply. I used Naim's XLR terminated cables to connect the NAP 250 and Townshend Fractal F1 speaker cable to carry signal to a pair of PMC twenty5.26i floorstanding speakers. From there on everything gets a little hazy, but I can say that it was very compelling and quite difficult to put down.

The latest Focal & Naim app is very easy to set up and navigate, you have to tell the NSC 222 that it's connected by ethernet, but once it knows it doesn't forget. I also found that my iPad (iOS 15.4) wasn't able to access Qobuz via the app but my iPhone (iOS 15.6) was fine, it's a pity I can't update the former. But the bigger screen made playing from local and external sources very easy so I stuck with it for the most part.

The sound of this trio is more distinctly Naim-like than I recall from the time spent with a NAP 250 DR. The latest NAP 250 is more of a groove monster, it positively revels in a beat and can open up the most dense of musical passages in a way that totally eludes many more powerful designs. It does this so well that albums and tracks that seemed 'difficult' in the past suddenly make musical sense. Timing has always been a Naim strength, and this latest combo makes it clear that it has not lost its mojo in this department.

Mojo rising

It's achieved by separating out the various instruments and voices in a mix yet simultaneously revealing the nature

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» of their integration as a musical unit. Some amplifiers produce a fluent yet slightly amorphous rendition of a band whereas others pick up the fine details of how the various musicians are playing, these Naim components show you what each is contributing but doesn't let this get in the way of the interplay that produces the synchronicity of the performance. Hard to explain, easy to enjoy, very easy.

All about that bass

This is at least partly down to the precise way that the NAP 250 deals with bass. It doesn't sound clinical but bass notes stop and start in a quick but natural fashion. This is not achieved by ignoring low bass either, there is plenty of current available to deliver the weight and power of this critical part of the spectrum, but neither is there any blurring of the attack and decay. The amp is clean and it projects into the room in convincing fashion. Its imaging is not perhaps as three dimensional as other amplifiers but neither is it flat. It's safe to say that the New Classic amps were voiced for those looking to become immersed in the spirit and flow of the music rather than the sense of aural presence.

If you like guitars, the balance of the NAP 250 will be right up your alley!. It's not bright but steel strings really come alive in its grasp. Likewise the brass instruments of jazz are beautifully delivered, it's here that the timing excellence really comes to the fore. Sax and/or trumpet lead pieces can easily become harsh and fatiguing on a revealing system that doesn't have this level of coherence, in fact some stuff is almost unlistenable to my ears. So it's a revelation to discover that the problem isn't the recording, and that it's possible to enjoy the intensity of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Miles Davis in their full glory without your ears bleeding.

Using the NSC 222 and NPX 300 with my Moor Amps Angel 6 power amplifier produced a richer sonic picture with greater emphasis on image depth. It didn't match the NAP 250's rhythmic skills but showed the preamp/streamer to be highly adept on its own by delivering Joe Chamber's *Dance Kobina* [Blue Note] in highly engaging fashion. I used this set up to see what the NPX 300 brought to the party, it turns out it brings a lot. The NSC 222 does everything well on its own but adding the separate power supply brings a significant increase in detail resolution. Now low-level sounds are clear and these bring depth and nuance that make the presentation a lot more convincing, so much so that the feeling behind the music is far clearer and the goose bump factor gets very strong. I would suggest

> I would go so far as to say that Naim has gone back to its roots and found the essence of what it was all about in the glory days.

NSC 222 buyers live with the internal power supply for a while just so that they get the full impact when adding an NPX 300, it's quite a thrill. Nothing's left to chance here; I'm not that 'into' headphones, but even I noticed that output is excellent... and identical to the one fitted to the Uniti Atom.

New Classic might look like a facelift, a rather good looking one at that, but it's far more than that. I would go so far as to say that Naim has gone back to its roots and found the essence of what it was all about in the glory days. The fact that it has been able to do this whilst delivering such »

> This triumvirate produces a sound that will stop you swiping and immerse you in the musical experience, letting you feel the emotions that were recorded in the first place.

» a heavily featured and future proof streamer/preamplifier is remarkable. What really matters of course is that this triumvirate produces a sound that will stop you swiping and immerse you in the musical experience, letting you feel the emotions that were recorded in the first place. There are plenty of streamers and amps that produce a spectacular sound but not nearly so many that let you hear what really matters in the music. The Naim NSC 222, NPX 300 and NAP 250 combination gets to the parts that others fail to reach and they do it in a very nicely executed package. +

Technical specifications

NSC 222

Type Solid-state preamplifier, network streamer, DAC

Analogue Inputs One pair of single-ended inputs (via RCA jacks), one pair of single-ended inputs (via 8-pin DIN), one MM phono input (via RCA jacks)

Digital Inputs One coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jack), One coaxial S/PDIF (via BNC), two TOSLink, one USB A

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats FLAC/WAV/MP3, etc. Sampling rate for D/A conversion upt to 384kHz/32 bit, DSD 128

Music services/Wi-Fi inputs Google Cast, Airplay 2, Bluetooth aptX, Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Qobuz

Analogue Outputs One stereo pseudo balanced (via XLR connectors), one stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks), 6.35mm headphone output (1.5W into 16Ω output)

Frequency Response

MM -3dB at 10Hz, RIAA +/-0.1dB
Line 3Hz to 40kHz -3dB
Digital 3Hz to 27kHz -3dB

Distortion (THD + Noise)

Line 0.0025% @2.2V input volume at 0dB,1kHz
(Line 0.015% @2.2V input volume at 0dB, 20kHz)
Digital 0.0035% @0dBFS volume at 0dB, 1kHz

User Interface display (on main unit), Focal & Naim application software, Roon Ready

Dimensions (H×W×D) 91.5 × 432 × 317.5mm

Weight 11kg **Price** £5,700

NAP 250

Type Transistor stereo power amplifier

Valve complement N/A

Analogue inputs One pair balanced (via XLR jacks)

Analogue outputs Two pairs of speaker outputs (via 4mm sockets)

Power output 100Wpc @ 8 Ohms, 190Wpc @ 4 Ohms

Bandwidth 1.4Hz-100kHz @-3dV

Sensitivity 1V to rated power

Distortion THD+N at 2/3rds full power 8 @1kHz (0.013%)

Signal to Noise Ratio 111dB

Dimensions (H×W×D) 91.5 × 432 × 317.5mm

Weight 16.8kg **Price** £5,700

NPX 300

Type external power supply

Accessories Powerline Lite power cable, Burndy cables

Dimensions (H×W×D) 91.5 × 432 × 317.5mm

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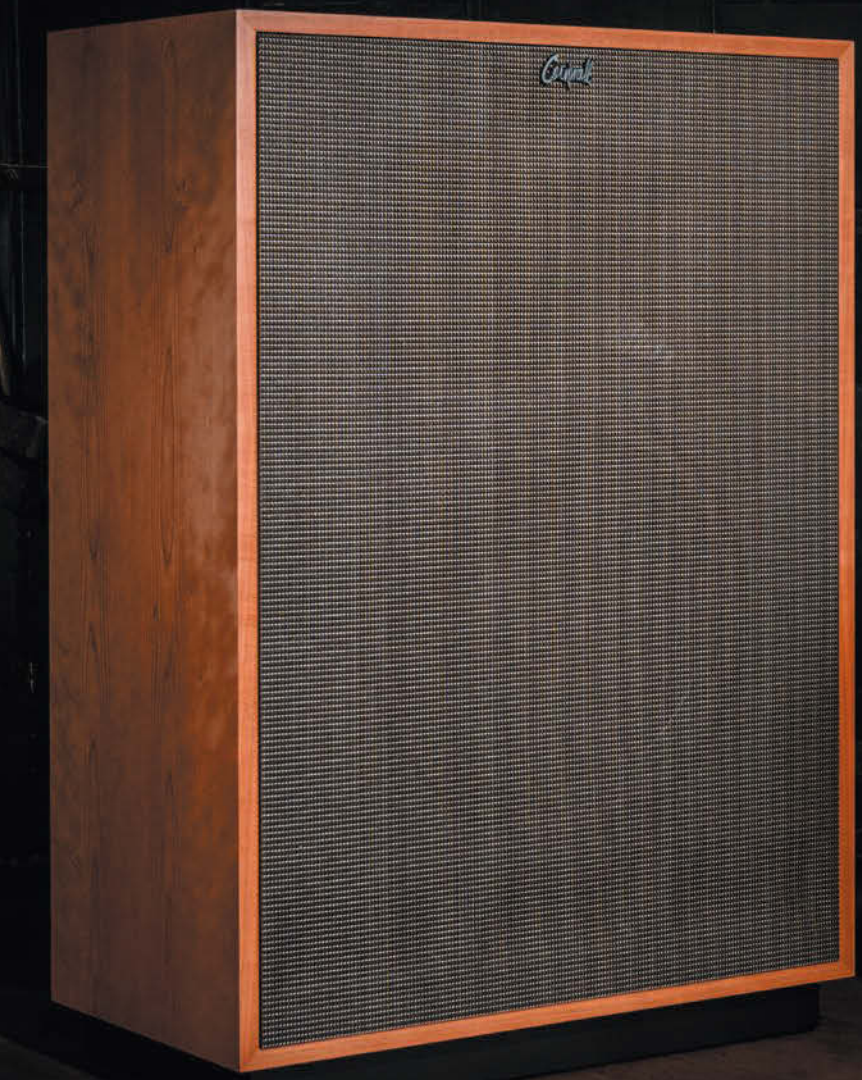

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Wilson Audio Alexx V floorstanding loudspeakers

Alan Sircom

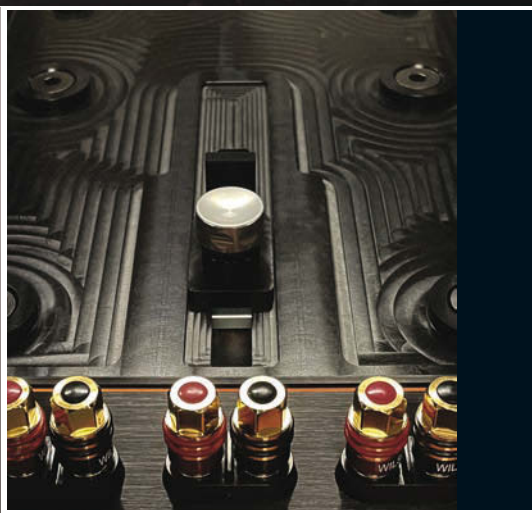
Damn those Romans! Whenever you see the capital letter 'V' after a name, you think it's a suffix, denoting 'the fifth'. It summons up the 'band of brothers' speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the Saturn V rocket that put men on the moon in 1969, the Supermarine Spitfire Mk V, and so on. So, naturally, seeing the name 'Alexx V', you expect the Wilson Audio floorstanding titan to be the fifth version of the loudspeaker design. And you expect wrong; the 'V' stands for 'V-Material', so it's pronounced 'Alexx Vee' not 'Alexx Five'. I'm not admonishing anyone here but writing it down like this might be the only way I can push thinking of it as 'Alexx Five' out of my brain.

As you can probably guess by the name pointing to V-Material, a new proprietary formulation joins the already secret vibration-isolating 'X-Material' used throughout Wilson Audio enclosures and the more naturally vibration-transmissive – but equally proprietary – 'S-Material' used almost exclusively in the company's front baffles. The new V-Material is used in the interfaces between enclosures to better absorb vibration. Most notably, the new material is used in the top panel of the bass cabinet, to limit the vibration from that large, air-moving box from activating vibration or resonance in the gantry-mounted upper enclosures for midrange and treble. It's also used in the new footers, that are supplied as standard on the Alexx V and are available for other loudspeakers in the range as the optional 'Acoustic Diode'. V-Material is also core to the new range of Pedestal footers designed for electronics.

It's not just good, it's Austenitic!

Incidentally, both the Acoustic Diodes and the Pedestal footers use V-Material with Austenitic Stainless Steel. This is a 'face-centred cubic' steel alloy that is used in medical, automotive, and aerospace because it's exceptionally resistant to corrosion, very strong and yet formable, and – because it can't be hardened by heat treatment – extremely heat resistant. And the reason I mention all this is nothing whatsoever to do with 'Austenitic' being named after an English metallurgist with the delightfully Victorian name of 'Sir William Chandler Roberts-Austin' who was Assayer to the Royal Mint, and who rocked some exceptionally good »

> This tweeter also benefits from the company's expansion into 3D printing as the new carbon-fibre design is manufactured in house.



» 'mutton chops' facial hair. Nope… it's all about the steel for me, honest.

When it comes to the meaty bits of the Alexx V, everything changes. Except for the wholly new tweeter, all the drive units have been seen before in other Wilson Audio loudspeakers, although none have been used in previous Alexx models. There's nothing wrong with this; it represents a coming together of disparate threads in Wilson Audio designs.

The tweeter, however, is new for the Alexx V. The Convergent Synergy Carbon (CSC) tweeter builds on the previous Convergent Synergy motor while featuring a unique rear-wave housing (above). This tweeter also benefits from the company's expansion into 3D printing as the carbon-fibre design is manufactured in-house. This new tweeter design is claimed to produce even more linear high-frequencies than its predecessors.

I am reluctant to gloss over the changes to the other loudspeaker drivers just because they appeared in other designs. Take the 7" midrange driver, for example. Yes, if you follow Wilson Audio designs closely, you'll notice that this is the same 'QuadraMag' design first used in the Chronosonic XVX. But, that's worth restating. This driver uses an Alnico magnet (aluminium, nickel and cobalt) in place of rare-earth metals. Alnico was the magnetic material of choice for some of the finest loudspeaker drivers ever made from the 1930s until the mid 1970s. It has seen something of a comeback of late as people discovered that it wasn't just that they are less brittle than rare-earth magnets; they sound damn good too!

Similarly, the in-house designed and manufactured AudioCapX-WA capacitors (also first seen in the Chronosonic XVX and more recently the SabrinaX) are used in the crossover of the Alexx V. »

Clearly, limitless.

"It's almost as if the streamer is stripping away everything that isn't music and presenting the DAC with the signal alone with precise yet fluent form that sounds so right it's uncanny."

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> You get the feeling of more of a collaboration between amplifier and loudspeaker, rather than the loudspeaker exposing the limitations of the amplifier.

Perhaps the most visible change between the original Alexx and this new second iteration is the use of an open-architecture gantry, as used in the WAMM Master Chronosonic and Chronosonic XVX. Perhaps surprisingly, the new open side panels of the Alexx V are more rigid than the solid gantry of the previous Alexx. They also minimise pressure build-up behind the upper mid and treble enclosures, and – of course – make installation and adjustment considerably easier.

I see the light!

A useful tool for installers that will likely stay in place long after the process is finished is the new Coolfall Sono 1 lighting solution. A cross-brace at the rear of the gantry is illuminated, which makes module set-up and time-alignment fine-tuning a little easier. It also looks the part; it's like rim-lighting your loudspeakers! And just as other aspects of Wilson Audio design filter up and down the line, I expect this to be seen in later iterations of Wilson's higher-end models.

Light show notwithstanding, installation shouldn't be a problem, because you shouldn't be involved in the installation process! This isn't because it's some sort of dark art, but instead it's a precise application of positioning and micrometer adjustment of midrange and treble cabinets within the upper gantry that is best done by trained experts. Installation is more predictable and repeatable as a result. In fact, the only real downside for installers that I can see is because those gantries are now open, it's the installer equivalent of 'show your working'. If you do a sloppy job of dressing cables, it's now on show for all to see.

It also means that the Alexx V can fit into some surprisingly small spaces, as the time-alignment of the drivers allows for relatively near-field listening. OK, let's be honest, a pair of loudspeakers that stand as tall as Scarlett Johansson are not going to disappear in a tiny room. Also, in any such room, a full-range loudspeaker is an exercise in bass management. But, unlike many similarly specified loudspeakers, the Alexx V's ability to be adjusted to the listener's position makes them more likely than most to be sonically acceptable in far smaller spaces than you might first imagine.

The WASP (Wilson Audio Set-up Procedure) finds the ideal position for loudspeakers in a room, and that spot does not change as the loudspeakers increase in size. The footprint of the Alexx V is some eight centimetres deeper than the new Alexia V, but notionally if an Alexia V fits comfortably in room, an Alexx V might also be possible.

Sense and sensitivity

A loudspeaker like the Wilson Audio Alexx V is notionally easy to drive. A rated sensitivity of 92dB and nominal impedance of four ohms means – from a surface reading of the specs at least – the loudspeaker seems as if it could be driven with almost any amplifier on the market today. However, the loudspeaker's impedance plot drops to two ohms at 250Hz, and that means it needs some power behind the throne. It doesn't automatically mean a beefy solid-state amplifier. Even if many Wilson loudspeakers today are demonstrated in the company of D'Agostino solid-state amps, dCS digital electronics, Transparent Audio cables and Artesania equipment supports, that doesn't make such systems mandatory for the Alexx V; I used them with the larger Karan Acoustics Master Collection amplifiers, but I've also heard them (and heard of them) working well with VTL, Robert Koda, Audio Research, Vitus and more.

Part of the reason I mention so many amp names is that one of the big changes to have happened to Wilson Audio loudspeakers is they have become far more amplifier-supportive than previous iterations. You get the feeling of more of a collaboration between amplifier and loudspeaker, rather than the loudspeaker exposing the limitations of the amplifier or imposing its signature on the system. That's not to say the Alexx V is somehow colourless or that previous editions exhibited some form of coloration.

In all cases, the Alexx V has common elements of a sublime image size and expansiveness coupled with a seemingly endless ability to be driven as hard as your ears or your amps can take. This might read like I'm embracing my inner caveman, but that unburstability is not just there for playing loud, it's for playing with full-thickness dynamic range at any listening level. That's an exceptionally rare achievement in 'cone-and-dome' loudspeakers and something more akin to electrostatic loudspeakers, but without their inherent dynamic limitations imposed on the sound. I've heard this a couple of times before and it was in the humbling experience felt from the WAMM Master Chronosonic and Chronosonic XVX.

Play something powerfully dynamic – the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth symphony for example – and it can fall apart when played too loud or too quiet. But not here; the scale doesn't change, the tonality remains constant. Played quiet, it doesn't sound like two-thirds of an orchestra, a smaller orchestra, an orchestra playing *pianissimo* or one that's far away; it's the full orchestra, just quieter. And that's remarkable.

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» That's just the jumping off point for this loudspeaker. The staging is impressive too. Impressive not simply in size, scale and transparency; it's the sort of sound that's impressive in tone and that elusive sense of realism that so few loudspeakers achieve in the real world.

And once more, the loudspeaker has that 'left me speechless' property that the Chronosonic XVX and WAMM Master Chronosonic have. Play something that is both superbly-recorded and that you know really, really well. For me, that's Joyce DiDonato [*Stella Di Napoli,* Erato], Duke Ellington/Ray Brown's [*This One's For Blanton!*!, Pablo], Lana Del Ray [*Norman F***ing Rockwell*, Polydor] and –guilty pleasure time – Joe Sample, Ray Brown (again) and Shelly Manne [*The Three*, Inner City]. Each album has been played hundreds or even thousands of times by me to assess equipment, and each album sounded shiny and new like the first time I heard them.

It's all about balance

There is a sense of balance to the sound of the Alexx V that makes that renewal possible. Everything is in good order and equally so. The tonal balance is intrinsically 'right', expressive and articulate from the deepest bass to the highest treble. The dynamic range is nothing short of thrilling, even to the point of pressure-loading the room with every bass drum beat and the combination of macro and micro-dynamics (as in the big scale loud-to-soft movements of the music and its ability to resolve tiny details in the mix while doing so) are little short of astounding. Stereo staging is also an elegant balance of being extremely big and impressive and yet unobtrusive; this sounds like an oxymoron until you hear it. It's clean, fast, expressive and supremely detailed. It also keeps good time; while perhaps a secondary concern when compared to some of the more rhythm-obsessed 'Brit-Fi' boxes, the Alexx V has a more ordered sense of rhythm and greater temporal drive than its predecessor!

V for Victory!

Perhaps the lone concession in the Alexx V sound is the change in tonal balance from the previous Alexx from that new tweeter, but it brings the design more in line with current Wilson designs. The tweeter, however, is also the most noticeable difference between the Alexx V and the really big guns in the Wilson Audio arsenal; the tweeter is effortless and resolving by normal standards, but no match for the extraordinary levels of detail retrieval from the Chronosonic XVX. I don't see that as a downside; if anything it's a victory given the price differential.

The Alexx V is an important loudspeaker for Wilson Audio as it the 'realistic' step up for owners of Alexias and even owners of Sashas. Beyond the Alexx V, the sheer physical size of the loudspeaker means it demands a larger, ideally dedicated, listening room. The footprint of the Alexx V means it can be almost a straight swap for the Sasha and Alexia. But to be a worthy contender for that upgrade market, it needs to deliver the goods and represent a substantial improvement over both of these loudspeakers... and the Alexx it replaces. Fortunately for Wilson Audio, it does that brilliantly. In fact, it's a baby Chronosonic XVX! +

Technical specifications

Type Four-way, five-driver dynamic loudspeaker

Driver complement One 320mm woofer, one 270mm woofer, one 180mm lower midrange, one 150mm upper midrange, one 25mm tweeter

Loading XLF port, front- or rear-firing (woofer); rear vented (lower-midrange module); rear vented (upper-midrange module)

Frequency response 20Hz–32kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity 92dB/1W/1m at 1kHz

Nominal impedance 4 ohms, 2.0 ohms minimum at 250Hz

Minimum amplifier power 50Wpc

Dimensions (W×H×D) 40 × 161 × 71cm

Weight 227kg per speaker

Price £149,998 per pair (standard colours; upgrade, custom, and premium colours at additional charge)

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Atoll IN300
integrated amplifier/DAC

Chris Frankland

I first encountered the Atoll brand from France four years ago when my local retailer had one of its amplifiers on loan for evaluation. I remember being pretty impressed by it. The original UK distributor then ceased to import the brand and so it disappeared off my radar until I spotted it again at a recent show with a new distributor. So the time seemed right to get one in for review, the one chosen being the IN300 integrated amplifier with built-in DAC.

The IN300 integrated 150W amplifier from Atoll sits at the top of its Signature series of integrated amps, which starts with the 50W IN50 at £850 up to the 120W IN200 (that we tested in issue 116) at £1,750. The flagship IN400Se from the high-end 400 Line, introduced in 2010/11, and a radical departure for the company in terms of styling, sits at £4,900, leaving a rather large gap between itself and the IN200. The IN300, part of its Signature series, plugs that hole and was introduced in 2016 when the company expanded its production facilities in Normandy.

Atoll was founded in 1997 by Stéphane and Emmanuel Dubreuil because they perceived there was a lack of audiophile products at affordable prices. Its very first products were the IN50 and IN80 integrated amps, the PR100 preamp and two power amps – the AM50 and AM80.

Atoll enlarged its original premises in 2001 and in the years that followed, the company added a three-channel and five-channel power amp, CD players and transports, DACs, streamers and all-in-one streamer/DAC/amplifiers.

Hand assembled

At its HQ and factory in Brécey, Normandy, all of its products are hand assembled, from, wherever it can, components sourced in France. And when I say assembled by hand, that's what they are – components are inserted and soldered by hand, because Atoll believes that is the best way to do it.

Atoll uses discrete-component Class A circuits for its preamps and Class AB for their power amps, which use MOSFET output transistors. This combination, the company believes, offers the advantage of the highest efficiency with outstanding audio performance.

The IN300 integrated amplifier I am reviewing here impresses with its weight (16kg) when you take it out of

its box. It uses a dual mono circuit configuration and its weightiness is no surprise when you learn it uses two output transformers rated at 440VA and 12 x 6,800µF filtering capacitors. It runs high-end cable to the speaker output posts, which are custom manufactured for Atoll.

Atoll says that it uses the bear minimum of feedback to provide 'a lot of dynamics and a very natural sound'. The analogue stages use MKP Mundorf shielded capacitors, while in the digital stages they use MKP Vishay capacitors.

All stages use discrete components and the circuit boards are double-sided with a nickel/gold finish.

When you consider that this 150W integrated amplifier only sells for £2,995, the fact that it comes with a DAC built in as standard makes it really good value for money. Even within Atoll's own product line-up, consider that if you bought the lower-priced IN200 (£1,750), the optional DAC board would set you back another £350.

The DAC in the IN300 uses an AKM AK4490 chip set and boasts a signal-to-noise ratio and dynamic range of 120dB. It will handle 16-32bit PCM streams up to 384kHz on its asynchronous USB input and up to 192kHz/24bit on its coaxial and optical inputs. This means you could take the digital output from your CD player and feed it into the IN300's DAC. If you have an entry-level or lower-end CD player, this could well deliver an improvement in sound quality, but more about that later.

The DAC also has a high-resolution USB B input. The instruction manual seems to suggest the USB input is intended to connect a computer. I didn't want to do that, although you could do that to get you started. But it would be better to use a reasonably priced streamer, such as the SOTM SMS200 Neo or, as I did, the Pro-Ject Stream Box Ultra S2. Of course, it worked perfectly, so ignore what the manual says.

I must admit that the Atoll's rather understated, minimalist styling did appeal to me and it did look moody in its black finish with that stylised swoop sculpted into the front and its small display screen.

You can access all the amp's functions using the two rotary knobs either side of the display screen, but most people, like me, will doubtless use the excellent remote control. On the bottom left of the front panel, there is also a 6.3mm jack headphone output.

Some DACs these days, especially at higher price points, throw in a lot of bells and whistles, such as numerous digital filters. The IN300 was blissfully lacking in these filters, which I have in many cases wasted hours listening to, trying to discern the differences, only to discover that they are either non-existent or so slight as to be inconsequential.

Extreme clues

On the back panel, speakers connect to chunky terminals on the extreme left and right – a clue to its dual-mono topology. To the right of the left channel speaker terminal are the DAC inputs – two coax, two optical and a USB. Next to those is the Bluetooth receiver. Below those are five RCA line level inputs, plus a tape output and two preamp outputs to connect to a separate power amplifier. There are also two XLR inputs. There was no phono input on the review model, but an optional MM/MC phono board is available for an extra £100. I evaluated the IN300 using the Pro-Ject streamer straight into the Atoll's DAC. In addition to that I fed it with a diet of CDs played on an Audio Note CDT-Five CD transport and DAC5 Special. Speakers used were the NEAT Xplorer floorstanding speakers.

I started out with some streaming from Tidal. Kicking off with the uptempo 'No One Emotion' from George Benson's *20/20* album, I was immediately impressed at how well »

> I had another well-respected integrated amp to hand that costs almost £1,000 more and there was no doubt I preferred the Atoll.

» the IN300 drove the sound along with great dynamics, pace and poise. Benson's vocals were conveyed with presence, power and emotional impact without sounding overpowering. I had another well-respected integrated amp to hand that costs almost £1,000 more and there was no doubt I preferred the Atoll, which simply put more life and pizazz into the music.

Turning to guitarist Larry Carlton, I played 'Hello Tomorrow' from his *Discovery* album and the IN300 impressed again with its insights into Carlton's guitar play, while percussion and drums were snappy and detailed. Saxophone had warmth, body and projection without being glaring. Bass lines were also weighty and tuneful. I then streamed a wonderful ballad from Natalie Cole's *Good to be Back* album where she duets with legendary vocalist Freddie Jackson. The IN300 managed to capture the energy and emotion of their soaring vocal performances without making them shout. The IN300 also convincingly outperformed the other more expensive integrated amp.

Even more impressive

The sound using the Audio Note CD transport and DAC was even more impressive and the IN300 proved more than good enough to show a big improvement in quality, demonstrating that it is worth buying as good a CD player as you can afford to pair with it.

Using Ben Sidran's 'Sunny Side of the Street' from the *Enivré d'Amour* CD, there was no doubt that his vocals were more open and articulate with more emotion, while drums and percussion were crisper and more dynamic and the bass line really moved along better, conveying the rhythmic structure of the song more coherently. So, if you are using a low-to-middle-priced CD player, using the IN300's DAC may provide a worthwhile improvement in sound.

The only thing left for me to try was its headphone output. How good is that? To find out, I connected a pair of Focal Clear headphones. This is how I found what I would say is the IN300's Achilles heel. The sound using headphones was rather compressed, uninvolving and strangely bass heavy. The music seemed to lose its get up and go. So it would be worth looking at a separate headphone amplifier if that's how you listen for a lot of the time. But if that's its only minor flaw, that is not bad going.

The Atoll IN300 is an exceptionally impressive piece of kit. It is beautifully made, sounds superb and with its built-in DAC represents extraordinary performance for the price. I recommend it wholeheartedly. +

Technical specifications

Type Two channel solid state (MOSFET) integrated amplifier

Inputs Analogue 5 × RCA, 1 × XLR, 1 x bypass
Digital 2 × coax, 2 × optical, 1 × USB, 1 × Bluetooth

Outputs 2 × pre out, 1 × tape out, 1 × headphone jack 6.35mm, 1 × speaker

Power output 2 × 150W RMS into 8Ω, 2 × 260W RMS into 4Ω

Distortion 0.05% @ 10W, 1kHz

Bandwidth 5Hz–100kHz (-3dB)

Signal to noise ratio 100dB

Dimensions (H×W×D) 103mm × 440mm × 360mm

Weight 16kg

Price £2,995, optional MM/MC phono board at £100 extra

Manufacturer Atoll Electronique
www.atoll-electronique.com

UK distributor Replay Audio Distribution
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Vimberg Amea
stand-mount loudspeakers

Alan Sircom

Vimberg is the sister brand to TIDAL of TIDAL Audio GmbH, a German high-end manufacturer which has been making top end electronics and loudspeakers since the late 1990s. Just how 'top' is 'top end'? Three words sum that up: "TIDAL for Bugatti". It could be very easy to make the more attainably priced Vimberg a diffusion brand, offering little of what TIDAL delivers beyond a name, but as the only stand-mount loudspeaker in either company's range, the Vimberg Amea proves otherwise; it isn't an opening gambit in a very high-end game. It's much. Much more.

The Amea is an elegant design, back-swept and angled to not simply look good but to reduce internal standing waves inside that aluminium reinforced HDF cabinet. It's a two-way design, but with a rear-firing passive woofer, using a 220mm Accuton woofer with a diaphragm made from aluminium. Accuton also provide the main mid-bass unit itself; a 173mm ceramic unit, and this sits on the same thick aluminium baffle plate as the 30mm ceramic tweeter (or the 30mm 'pure diamond' tweeter in the higher-spec Amea D). Like all Accuton drivers, the metal mesh grills are a permanent fixture, and they are designed to accommodate this protection, sonically.

The best of both worlds

There is an inevitable balance of trade-offs in a loudspeaker of this size. How the designer resolves that balance of trade-offs is vitally important in making a loudspeaker sound good. One could argue this applies universally, but in making extremely high performance stand-mount »

> The Amea doesn't try to emulate a big loudspeaker, nor does it try the 'small loudspeaker made big' trick.

» loudspeakers, getting this balance right is absolutely crucial. For example, a port is the usual way to get around the limitations of cabinet volume inherent to stand-mount loudspeakers. But ports come at a sonic cost. Using a rear-firing passive woofer delivers an altogether more sonically correct sound, but increases cost and the structural demands of that cabinet. Using HDF for that cabinet is a good choice to meet those demands, but can sound over-damped if used alone. Using aluminium is also a good choice, but can be a potential source of resonance due to hysteresis effect. Combining the two could bring out the worst in both materials, but in the case of the Amea, it brings out the best.

British Bias Conclusion

It's time to bust a myth long held in some circles of audio; that British loudspeaker makers still 'own' the stand-mount loudspeaker. In fairness, like most myths, it is built around a kernel of truth. Back in the 1960s, the development of small monitor loudspeakers by the British Broadcasting Corporation did set a very high standard for stand-mounts, and many of those big names in loudspeaker designs that continued that trend were both British and often featured designers who 'made their bones' in the BBC. Those days are long passed, but the myth still holds. In fact, in some circles that myth only serves to hold back loudspeaker development, as some seem trapped in a post-BBC design brief. Loudspeakers like the Vimberg Amea show just how much more can be had from a good stand-mount loudspeaker.

To do or not to do

It's perhaps odd to begin to talk about the sound quality of a loudspeaker by first defining what it doesn't do. In the case of the Vimberg Amea, however, such a definition is important. The Amea doesn't try to emulate a big loudspeaker, nor does it try the 'small loudspeaker made big' trick. Instead, it makes a correctly-scaled sound for a loudspeaker of its size. What's surprising in listening to the Amea is just how many loudspeakers of a similar proposition and size fail to reach this goal.

What the Amea does so well is to create a sense of poise in everything it touches; from its musical presentation to its stereo staging and easy, effortless sense of rhythm. This does rely on an exceptional set of up-stream electronics and a first-class installation. It also doesn't suffer fools »

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» gladly and mediocre recordings or poor quality transfers are easy to spot; the Amea doesn't make these recordings unpalatable; just register up their limitations. However, with good equipment (it's more about quality than quantity, and a good 50W amp with a 'stiff' power supply will sound better than something more powerful but less controlled), you have a sound that is stunningly good.

The 'stunningly good' part is down to transient speed and accuracy. Even something as simple as a strummed acoustic guitar highlights this speed and accuracy perfectly, the attack of pick (or fingers) hitting the strings, the resonance of the sound box and the decay of those first notes while others come along all combine to give the listener an uncanny sense of hearing a live musician in a live space, and this is aided by an excellent dynamic range. Yes, played against the real instrument, you can hear the difference, but we won't hear Nic Jones playing his guitar after that fateful accident in 1982 that left him unable to play, so 'Canadee-I-O' from *Penguin Eggs* [Topic] remains an impossible bit of drop-tuning finger-picking and the intervening 43 years since its recording just melt away when played through the Amea.

The Vimberg Amea also scales well. Moving from the deft touch of Nic Jones' folk playing and singing to large orchestral pieces such as Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances [Zinman, Baltimore SO, Telarc] and the sound simply grows in size and stature. Swap that for Mahler's Eighth [Solti, Chicago SO, Decca] and the sound grows to match. Drop back to smoky jazz clubs of the 1950s, or raw New York studios of the 1970s and once again the Amea 'right-sizes' the sound. Note, this is not simply image size we're discussing here, but the whole sense of believability the loudspeakers can deliver.

A loudspeaker at this level (and featuring the drive units it does) is detailed by default. The Vimberg Amea is no exception; there is so much information on tap. And, while some of that information is about the status of the system and the quality of the recording, it's always on the right side of sounding harsh or aggressive. This is a rare find and an equally rare balance; so many loudspeakers are either too soft and laid-back sounding to deliver any useful information about the inner detail of the music, or are so powerfully fixated on information delivery that listening to the most insipid dinner jazz is an edge-of-the-seat experience. The Amea manages to give you all the energy and detail you can pull from a recording without making that experience tiring or 'edgy'.

Perhaps best of all, the Vimberg Amea does all this on any type of music you play through the loudspeakers... I know, I tried. OK, I didn't play any Noh or throat-singing (or, for that matter, the sound of a washing machine as part of a modern Musique Concrète performance – see pages 104–108 of this issue), but everything from opera to grime and all points in between.

Few things phased the loudspeakers. The nature of the drivers arguably prevent playing at amplifier melt-down levels, but the speaker is comfy everything from a whisper to a near-roar. But realistically... that's about it!

The little big question

The Amea asks – and answers – a question about the limits of high-performance stand-mount loudspeakers: Can a high-end stand-mount cut it? "Absolutely!" says the Amea. Although the most affordable loudspeaker from both Vimberg and TIDAL, the Amea is still a significant investment by stand-mount standards, especially if one goes for the diamond tweeter, piano gloss finish, stands and optional copper or brass faceplate. Most gravitate toward a larger floorstander design at this price point, but the Amea offers a viable alternative. This is especially important in metropolitan homes where tower loudspeakers are too large for consideration.

'Close your eyes and the speakers disappear' is so often heard more in the breach than the observance. Often, it's taken to mean 'these speakers sound bigger than you would expect', but that's not the case here. The Vimberg Amea really does disappear; you aren't hearing a small or a large loudspeaker. It's a design that loves a bit of Mozart, Mahler, Miles Davis and Metallica equally. While not ear-splittingly loud, it can be a bit of an animal yet can also deliver remarkable refinement when you move over to something more cerebral. To most, having a loudspeaker this capable is just an illusory fantasy, but it's all in a day's work for Vimberg's awesome Amea. +

Technical specifications

Type Two-way full-range stand-mount loudspeaker

Cabinet Vimberg MRD-cabinet with decoupled aluminium high-midrange mounting plate

Drivers 1 × 30 mm Accuton Cell ceramic tweeter, 1 × 173 mm Accuton ceramic midrange woofer, 1 × 220 mm Accuton passive radiator. Optional 30mm Accuton Cell diamond tweeter (Amea D), also upgradeable anytime later

Wiring and connections Mogami speaker cable wiring inside, Argento pure silver binding posts

Efficiency at 2.83V/1m/1KHz 86dB

Nominal impedance 5 ohm (lowest point 5.2 ohm at 100Hz)

Finishes Summit White, Jet Black, Slate Grey, Sonoma Orange, Amethyst and other colours on request. Vimberg real piano lacquer summit white or jet black

Dimensions (W×H×D) 51 × 62 × 71cm

Weight 20kg per loudspeakers

Price From £13,800 per pair

Manufacturer Vimberg www.vimberg.de

UK distributor Kog Audio
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Aqua Acoustic Quality La Diva M2 CD transport

Jason Kennedy

To paraphrase the much misquoted Mark Twain, reports that CD is dead are an exaggeration. It may no longer be the format of choice on the high street but among the musical cognoscenti, that's us, it remains a very popular format. It's not hard to see why; for a start, a lot of audio enthusiasts have thousands of CDs many of which are not available on streaming services. Then there's the intrinsic simplicity of playing them; no need for a smartphone or tablet, just press the button and you're away.

The drop in mainstream popularity has had one clear effect, and that's to reduce the number of players on the market. Where once dozens were released across all price points every year now we are down to one a month at the most. So, it's heartening to see that Italian brand Aqua Acoustic Quality has updated its La Diva CD transport and continue to offer a high quality disc spinner to the many audio enthusiasts who enjoy the format.

La Diva M2 looks exactly like its predecessor, which is very good indeed, it simply oozes quality with attention to detail at a very high level, and fit and finish in the premier league (music loving footballers take note). I love the Nextel finish on the casework and magnetic puck, and ditto the levers in place of buttons. These operate like buttons by springing up after they are pressed, but have a very definite action and immediate consequences in terms of the transport's behaviour. This is something that CD lovers take for granted but is less common in the world of streaming where a processor has to jump in with every command.

Of delight

The transport mechanism or disc drive sits beneath a lovely sliding lid on top of the machine. This has pros and cons. On the plus side, there is no drawer mechanism to go wrong and the process is a bit like playing a record. But on the inconvenience front, it requires top-shelf positioning if you are to be able to place and extract discs with ease. I have a turntable on the top shelf of my rack and used a reasonably high (eight-inch) space on the next shelf down. This was a bit of a fiddle, not least because you need to remove and replace the magnetic puck. On one occasion, I wasn't paying attention and the disc slid into the machine to the left of the drive bay; it didn't disappear but I was more careful thereafter. I guess that dedicated CD users »

> It is dedicated to the humble Red Book CD and doesn't dally with the likes of SACD or even DVD-Audio (if anyone remembers that).

» will afford La Diva M2 the top spot and thus avoid this sort of malarkey.

Dedication

Aqua is keen to point out that La Diva M2 is a "pure CD machine"; it is dedicated to the humble Red Book CD and doesn't dally with the likes of SACD or even DVD-Audio (if anyone remembers that). This is largely because the latter is dead and buried, and there is no protocol for digital connections with the DSD format that underpins SACD. La Diva M2 uses a modified CD Pro-8S transport mechanism from the optical division of Stream Unlimited, with an aluminium chassis and carbon-fibre turntable. Aqua developed the coding and wrote it to FPGA, which controls signal feed to the various outputs on the back of the machine, among which the AQLink I^2S is their proprietary connection for Aqua DACs.

Those with DACs from other brands have a good choice of connections to pick from; alongside S/PDIF on coaxial and (preferably) BNC connectors, there is AES/EBU on XLR and an AT&T fibre output. It doesn't have USB output and would probably be the only CD transport to do so if it did, but given that this is often the best input on modern DACs it's something that might be worth investigating. Those looking for ultimate digital synchronicity will be pleased to see a word clock output on a BNC connector, if your DAC has the same facility this is one area which warrants closer inspection, that is if the price of a decent clock isn't too frightening.

I mentioned attention to detail in the appearance of La Diva M2 so it shouldn't be a surprise to see that this continues inside the box. Here you will find a multi-stage voltage regulator for accurate disc drive control, tracking and focus, two low noise power transformers running the digital and servo sides separately, and fully floating galvanically and magnetic isolation between drive system and digital outputs.

Precise and compelling

I have to admit that my days of playing discs on a regular basis are long gone, but I still have a good collection of CDs and would prefer to listen to rips of those discs than to a streaming service. And going back to spinning polycarbonate proved to be a highly rewarding experience, with Aqua's La Diva M2 delivering a precise and compelling result through two very different digital to analogue converters.

La Diva M2 is very clear and definite in its presentation; there is no vagueness or blurring of leading edges and transients, and it seems a lot more calm and collected than »

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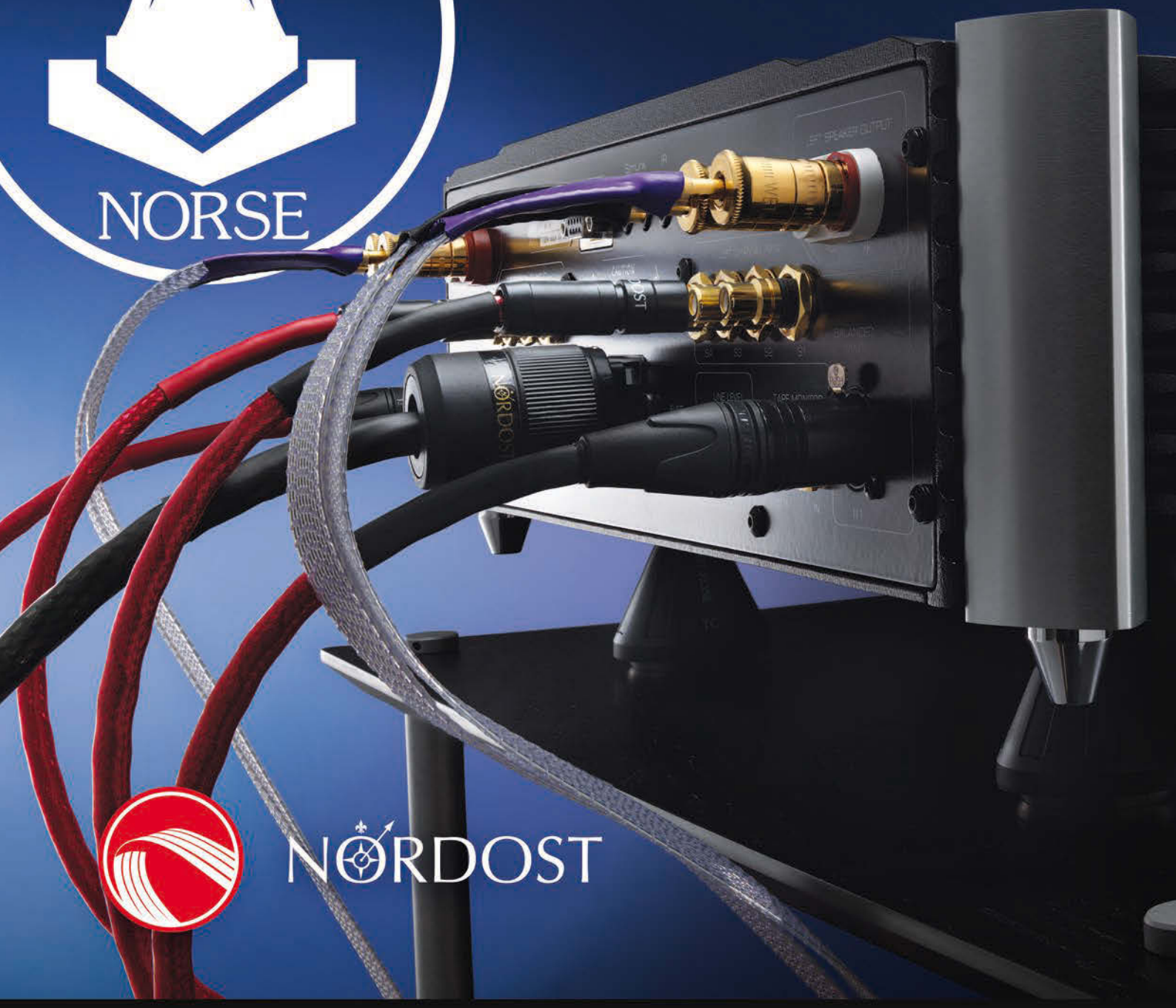

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» the CD players I used in recent times. You really feel that, on the one hand, the noise floor is extremely low and on the other, that the transport is extracting an awful lot of what the disc has to offer. CD's only real advantage over streaming is that it doesn't have to deal with noise coming in from a network connection, the technology comes from an era when this stuff didn't exist in audio and was developed in a cleaner electrical environment. Players still have to deal with noise on the mains, which has undoubtedly increased, but you don't often find a streamer with sonic backgrounds that are as quiet as you get with La Diva M2.

This is very good for producing leading edges without grain or blur, which give you all the attack of a note in clear and definite fashion. And that in turn means strong timing without any of the digital edginess that can afflict this format. I was very impressed with the dynamics on offer from the Aqua; it really makes the most of dynamic contrasts so when a quiet intro is used to give the following crescendo impact you know all about it. The sound is not dissimilar to the sort of thing you hear in pro audio, it has that no nonsense solidity of delivery, it's a confidence inspiring approach because it handles transients so well, nothing seems to phase it.

Keith Jarrett's live album *Testament* was recorded in London and Paris, and recorded really well at that. The piano has real body and weight and this much is clear on La Diva M2, it gives you a strong sense of the hardwood and steel of the instrument, and of the way that Jarrett could combine power and restraint in his improvisation. All of which is underpinned by compelling rhythm, here there is no apparent emphasis but it always comes to the fore. Something that will vary with different DACs of course but something that La Diva M2 is clearly very proficient at.

It makes my similarly priced streaming source, a Melco N10 server, sound a little soft and laid back, the Aqua having an impetus, a get up and go that the music files lack. Each suits different tastes and systems of course and as a rule the Melco is combined with a streamer but it's an interesting contrast. If you want to feel the power and energy of a well recorded drum set La Diva M2 makes a very good case for itself, here the transient speed and power of each impulse is very realistic. The drums on Tortoise's 'Ry Cooder' are all about attack and with this transport that quality is particularly well served. On the upbeat 'Diamonds On The Soles Of Her Shoes' [Paul Simon, *Graceland*] the bass line really pops while the voice and guitars are as open as you like, the steel strings have real zing. The rhythm is of course infectious, don't even try to sit down.

Sticking with the silver disc

CD is clearly in much better health than disc sales would suggest, it's now a format for afficionados who realise that it's not only more straightforward but quite possibly the least expensive option available to the sound quality conscious. The Aqua La Diva M2 is a superb piece of kit that makes a very strong case for sticking with the silver disc, it combines very high build quality with a strong, compelling sound that few who use their ears could resist. +

Technical specifications

Type Solid-state CD transport

Disc Types CD, CD-R

Digital Outputs Two S/PDIF (one coaxial RCA, one coaxial BNC), one AES/EBU (via XLR), one AT&T ST fibre optic, one AQLink Pro I^2S (via etherCON RJ45).

Frequency response N/A

Distortion Not specified

Signal to Noise Ratio Not specified

Dimensions (H×W×D) 100 × 450 × 370mm

Weight 10kg

Price £8,960

Manufacturer Aqua Acoustic Quality

www.aquahifi.com +44 (0)845 060 9395

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Galion TS120 SE
integrated valve amplifier

Alan Sircom

The logo on the front and top of the Galion TS120 SE valve integrated amplifier says a lot. It says 'Galion' but comes with a logo that looks like three sails on the main mast of a blue water heavily-armed cargo carrier of the 16th–18th Century. To most, that type of ship is known as a 'Galleon' and only French speakers spell it 'Galion', and… sure enough, the Galion is based in Québec, Canada.

That's not all. The prefix 'TS' comes from 'Thomas & Stereo' the YouTube channel of Thomas Tan; the man behind the Galion. '120' comes from its ability to run the relatively new KT120s (although it's supplied with two matched pairs Pavane KT88s as standard). The 'SE' suffix separates the standard warmer and punchier-sounding model from the more neutral, textured bass of the Special Edition. The amplifier is also a fast and capable valve integrated design that packs a punch, even in SE guise. So, however you choose to spell the name, 'Galion' is an apt one.

Fancy tickling

Let's get away from the semiotics of amplifier names and look at the amplifier itself. The TS120 SE is made in China by electronics manufacturer Doge to Thomas Tan's requirements. Tan wanted a pure valve/tube amplifier with the power and drive of solid-state bass. This tickled the fancy of Doge's lead designer – Mr Liu – especially as Tan suggested Doge approach the project with no budgetary constraints. If the amp costs a fortune, so be it.

> It's not the most obviously 'tube-ampy' sound, but in a very good way; the amplifier delivers excellent bass.

With 30 years of amplifier design under his belt, Mr Liu designed an integrated amplifier that is sub-divided into preamplifer, power amplifier and separate power supply in the same box… and the Galion TS120 was born.

Or almost. Tan had to convince the Jupiter Condenser Company of Ohio (which sounds like it comes straight out of 1950s sci-fi, but is in fact a bunch of like-minded audio enthusiasts) to build custom capacitors for the TS120 while running auditioning and listening tests. But eventually Tan completed the voicing with the new capacitors – adding Clarity caps in the SE version – and the amp was finally ready to come to market.

The design and development of Galion's TS120 is far from the usual process today. We live in a more corporate world, with companies considering balance sheets and the bottom line. Thomas Tan's company isn't that kind of audio maker; this is pure, unadulterated audio nerd at its finest. A product born out of passion rather than range-filling or necessity.

The amp uses a pair of 12AT7 and a pair of 12AX7 double-triodes, with the latter interchangeable with ECC83 and 702S tubes. For the power pentodes, the amplifier can use two pairs of KT88s (as supplied), 6550s or KT120s. Tube-rolling is not frowned upon by Galion… as I said, led by enthusiasts.

For an all-tube amp design, the specifications are comprehensive. It's a four line input design with a Home Theatre bypass input and both tape and two subwoofer outputs, all using gold-plated RCAs of solid stock. It has taps for four and eight ohm loudspeakers. Both flavours of TS120 include a microprocessor-driven auto-bias circuit, but to ensure it isn't constantly in circuit dragging the performance down, this sits outside the signal path. You operate it by pressing the 'change' then 'bias' button (on the front panel and replicated on the remote), you watch a quartet of red LEDs turn to blue LEDs on the front panel as it runs through its auto-bias, then it powers off. You flip between Class A and Class AB by pressing the 'change' button before the 'Class' button for the same reasons.

Time for TAB

There are tone controls on the amplifier that work surprisingly well, but can also be defeated, by moving from 'T' to 'A' or 'B' on a rotary knob on the front panel. Setting 'A' and 'B' have different levels of global feedback, I preferred 'A'. Neither the tone controls nor this 'TAB' knob are replicated on the hefty remote handset.

The amp has a solid look and feel, vaguely reminiscent of Ayon Audio in its curved side cheeks but lacking the shiny chrome round transformer cans. I think it looks classic.

Power it up, give it 30 seconds to soft-start and another 20 minutes or so to come up to its thermal happy place and the TS120 SE really starts to sing. It's not the most obviously 'tube-ampy' sound, but in a very good way; the amplifier delivers excellent bass and the overly thick and rich, syrupy warmth that is so often associated with 'hollow-state' technology is simply not there. Sure, it's 'airy' with a lively and lovely sounding treble and a lithe and vivid midrange, which you can almost certainly put down to the sound of valves. The Galion TS120 SE also has the characteristic 'wide, deep' soundstage properties so often

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» associated with good tubes. But there's also that sense of control, grip, and authority in the bass that sounds very much like a fine solid-state amplifier. The combination of the two is an excellent mix and one that is extremely alluring.

I don't want to make this sound like an amplifier with a dual personality, though. The bass, mid and treble all integrate well and the sense of top-to-bottom coherence is excellent. That grip over the bottom end could easily cause the amplifier to sound like two designs in one. But while the control over the bottom end is excellent, it's also entirely in keeping with the overall tonality of the TS120 SE, which is fundamentally accurate in approach.

Not the usual suspects

I was thinking how to express this in musical terms, using 'the usual suspects' in my regular collection of recordings I use to evaluate equipment, but I didn't need to even go that far. The first track I played when the amp was first warmed up encapsulated everything the TS120 SE did right; 'Five Years' by David Bowie [*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, MCA]. Perhaps the seminal 'opener' to an album, the slow build from the minimalist drums building to a crescendo of screaming with Mick Ronson's distorted guitar playing before fading out to the drum sounds once more. Those drums had depth and intensity but were never 'flabby' or 'flapping about'. Bowie's voice was originally articulate and impassioned, but as the vocal histrionics and the Spiders began joining in, the sound was allowed to break free. All the while every instrument was preserved in its three-dimensional space. I grew up with this record and it still gives up a few nuances on each listen, and the TS120 SE didn't disappoint in unravelling the track a little more. It also helps that the tonality of the amplifier invites long and deep listening sessions.

Downsides are trivial. It runs very hot, but it's a tube amplifier so that's like printing 'warning: contents hot' on a coffee cup. It needs a good few hundred hours of running in before it comes on song (allegedly… my sample already had enough miles on the clock). There's a warning against using Svetlana or TAD Winged C 6550 tubes, as the company has had some issues with them. Then there's the tube cage, which is technically required in some countries, and is not that pretty (in fairness to Galion, it's rare to find a tube cage that isn't the red-haired stepchild of the audio industry and the TS120's cage is no better or worse than most). Finally, like many all-tube amplifiers, powering the TS120 up without loudspeakers connected is not recommended. However, this is clearly mentioned (in French and English) in the manual.

Rebuilding the vacated high-end

Galion's integrated amplifier occupies a space in the market that many high-end brands have now vacated. It's also got what got people into high-end years ago and will get a new generation into high-end. I was extremely surprised by the Galion Audio TS120 SE, in all the good ways. No wonder it has become something of a YouTube 'darling'. That combination of tight, well-controlled bass, sublime openness and soaring, accurate treble makes it an amp to remember.

Some will discover the Galion TS120 SE amplifier as their first experience of what true high-end can offer. Others know their way around high-end sound but don't relish the radical cashectomy that usually comes with the territory. Regardless, this won't be the last we hear of Galion, and don't be surprised if the TS120 SE fires a few broadsides into your favourite amplifier of choice. +

Technical specifications

Type All-tube Class A/AB integrated amplifier

Power output 30W per channel (Class A); 50W per channel (Class AB)

Frequency Response 12Hz-80kHz (Class A); 17Hz–65kHz (Class AB)

THD (1kHz, at full power) ≤0.15% (Class A); ≤0.25% (Class AB)

Damping factor ('A' Setting) 10.8 (Class A), 9.3 (Class AB)

Damping factor ('B' Setting) 6.5 (Class A), 5.6 (Class AB)

Signal to noise ratio ≥90dB

Inputs 4× line (RCA stereo pair); 1× HT (RCA stereo pair)

Input Impedance 50kΩ

Line input sensitivity 420mV

Outputs 2x subwoofer (RCA), tape outputs (RCA stereo pair); loudspeaker terminals (4Ω/8Ω taps)

Standard tube complement 2× 12AX7, 2× 12AT7, 4× KT88

Dimensions (W×H×D) 43 × 21 × 36cm

Weight 30kg

Price $4,495 USD ($450 USD deposit)

Manufacturer Galion Audio

www.galion-audio.com +1-514-618-6377

UK demonstration facility Art + Sound

www.artandsound.co.uk +44(0)7711 569 999

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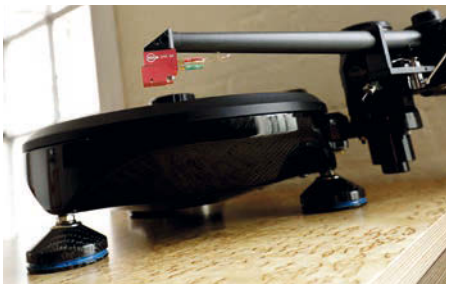

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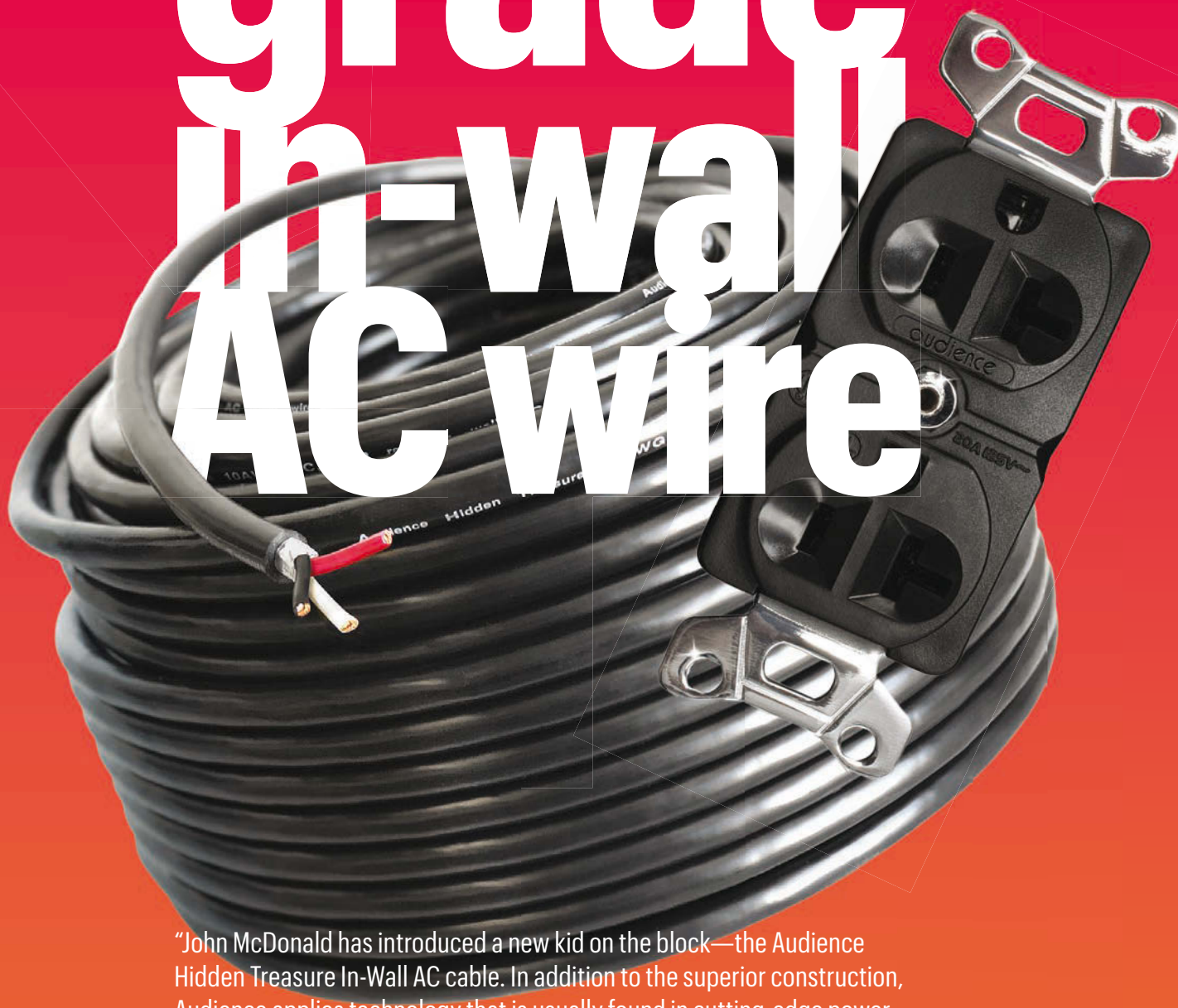

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PSB Alpha iQ
active loudspeaker streaming system

Simon Lucas

Despite what he sang in his song *Helpless* ("there is a town in North Ontario, with dream comfort memory to spare…"), Neil Young's home town of Omemee is very much in South Ontario. In fact, it's less than 100km from PSB's base in Pickering, which in Canadian terms is basically next door.

The abbreviation 'PSB' stands for 'Paul and Sue Barton' – and over fifty years since he established the company, Paul Barton remains the company's chief designer. The Alpha iQ is the latest of Paul's designs to emerge from Pickering, South Ontario. While he hasn't altered his company's philosophy of providing "high-performance solutions at a reasonable cost", Paul is more than willing to embrace any and all technologies that will allow him to do so. »

> The Alpha iQ has plenty of right-angles and pointy corners, but it's properly put together and actually even mildly tactile.

» So the Alpha iQ is that most modern of hi-fi propositions: a pair of powered loudspeakers with wireless streaming capability as well as a number of physical inputs. And its convenience credentials are only enhanced by the fact that each speaker is, at just 25 × 15 × 19cm (H×W×D), very helpfully compact.

Each cabinet is constructed mostly from MDF, with the rear baffle made of aluminium and the front baffle aluminium with MDF on top. Each features a 19mm aluminium dome tweeter with neodymium magnet and ferrofluid cooling, below a 102mm polypropylene mid/bass driver with steel basket and rubber surround, and each is home to 90 watts of Class D amplification. Each tweeter is powered by 30 of those watts, while each mid/bass driver gets the other 60. And each cabinet features an active DSP-based crossover between its two drivers, along with 24bit/192kHz digital-to-analogue conversion.

No latency

Each cabinet features a rear-firing bass reflex port, and the aluminium rear baffle is also home to a mains power connection via a figure-of-eight mains lead. The connection between the two is wireless – PSB claims no latency or interference in the wireless connection in any 'average-sized' home (and the Canadian Paradigm applies to the word 'average' here). The Alpha iQ should, therefore, be happy enough no matter where you choose to place it – in fact, part of the reasoning behind positioning the tweeter below the mid/bass driver concerns optimising the speakers' performance if they're positioned high up (or you're sitting low down).

Mind you, it's worth bearing in mind that you'll lose access to the touch controls positioned on the primary speaker's top surface if they're sited up high. The 'primary' speaker is the one doing most of the heavy lifting where functionality is concerned, you see – here's where all the wireless and physical connectivity is contained.

Wireless connectivity includes Wi-Fi, Bluetooth with aptX HD codec compatibility, Apple AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect and TIDAL Connect. In addition, the Alpha iQ is a BluOS-enabled product – so the BluOS control app offers the ability to integrate as many of your favourite music streaming services as you're prepared to pay for, as well as giving access to the entire planet's internet radio stations. Because the Alpha iQ has full MQA decoding and rendering capability, you can enjoy Radio Paradise's MQA-encoded content (as well as TIDAL's, obviously). And if you fancy using your self-contained system with headphones, the iQ Alpha is a Bluetooth transmitter as well as a receiver.

Physical connectivity, meanwhile, extends to an Ethernet socket, a USB-A slot (control of USB drives is available in the BluOS app), an analogue 3.5mm input, a digital optical socket and a pair of stereo RCA connections leading to a moving-magnet phono stage. And by way of an encore, there's an HDMI eARC socket – so you can easily make a significant upgrade to the sound you've been tolerating from your TV all this time.

The standard of build and finish is well up to standard – the Alpha iQ has plenty of right-angles and pointy corners, but it's properly put together and actually even mildly tactile. There are no grilles here, which seems like no kind of loss at all to me – the 'PSB' logo on the waveguide ahead of the »

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» tweeter is as decorative as the overall look is understated. Currently Alpha iQ is available in matt white and matt black finishes, although I had a sneaky peek at some rather more assertive colourways at CES in Las Vegas in January this year – they should be available sooner rather than later.

Despite the self-contained nature of this system – all you need is some mains power and a smartphone, and away you go – it's possible to make it the centre of a quite expansive system. So for the purposes of this test, it finds itself playing host to a Clearaudio Concept turntable (via the phono input), a Rega Apollo CD player (into the digital optical socket), a Cowon Plenue D3 portable music player (into the analogue input) and a Philips 48OLED806 (into the HDMI socket). In addition, an Apple iPhone 14 Pro takes care of BluOS operation and TIDAL Connect action, while a Nothing Phone (1) uses its aptX HD compatibility to make a Bluetooth connection. The size of the Alpha iQ almost invites you to put it on a shelf – but I'm trying to do the right thing here, and so each speaker is supported by a Soundstyle Z2 stand.

Impressive and welcome

What's initially most impressive (and welcome) about the way the Alpha iQ performs is the level of consistency it summons across each of its inputs, whether wired or wireless. The sound it delivers isn't utterly identical, of course, but the overall signature has admirable commonality – and that's when dealing with (among many other sources) a heavyweight vinyl reissue of Mogwai's *Come On Die Young* [Chemikal Underground], a CD of Madvillain's *Madvillany* [Stones Throw], a TIDAL Masters stream of Nina Simone's *Broadway-Blues-Ballads* [Philips] or a Disney+ -derived stream of Martin McDonagh's *The Banshees of Inisherin* [Searchlight].

In every circumstance, the PSB is an upfront and energetic listen. Low frequencies are perhaps just a little forward (in the name of 'excitement', no doubt), but they're properly controlled where attack and decay is concerned, carry plenty of detail regarding texture and timbre, and despite their assertive nature are rapid enough to a) keep up the momentum and b) allow decent rhythmic expression. The opposite end of the frequency range is a little more circumspect and a little less assertive – but there's nevertheless plenty of bite and shine to treble sounds, as well as similarly enjoyable levels of detail both broad and fine. In between, the Alpha iQ communicate in the manner of a garden-fence gossip – no detail, no matter how fine, eludes it, and vocalists get more than enough space to make their intentions and emotional condition absolutely plain. As a consequence, the Nina Simone recording sounds as eloquent and characterful as ever.

In fact, the sensation of 'space' is one of the true and unarguable strengths of the PSB system. The soundstage it summons is out of all proportion to the size of the speakers from which it emanates, and it's properly organised and arranged. Elbow-room is significant, even in dense recordings or Madvillain-style cut-and-paste collages, and it makes for an informative and easy-to-follow listen. It doesn't do any harm that the system is so tonality consistent, either – there's an impression of unity and singularity from the top to the frequency range. Yes, the lowest frequencies are keen, no matter how far from a rear wall you attempt to keep those bass reflex ports – but they do at least sound of a piece with the rest of the frequency information.

This is quite an intense-sounding system, even when it's playing at lower levels – and there's a definite lack of out-and-out dynamic headroom to its sound. Real volume dealers like Mogwai are made to sound quite loud even when they're playing quietly, and the PSB doesn't leave itself much room to manoeuvre when the band crank up the vehemence. But of greater concern and significance is the arbitrary nature of the control app – during the course of my testing it thought nothing of switching inputs (from 'analog' [sic] to 'Bluetooth', most commonly) entirely of its own volition.

Ultimately, though, the PSB Alpha iQ gets more than enough right to make overlooking its little wrongs simple enough. If it's convenience you crave, but are unwilling to make too many concessions where a) performance and b) your initial outlay are concerned, it's a small and perfectly formed option. +

Technical specifications

Type Bass-reflex loudspeaker system with integrated amplification, dsp, and wireless connectivity

Driver complement 102mm polypropylene mid/bass; 19mm aluminium dome tweeter
Amplification power (w)/type 180/Class D

Frequency response 64Hz–20kHz

Crossover frequencies:

Inputs HDMI eARC; digital optical; 3.5mm analogue; MM phono; ethernet; USB-A

Wireless inputs wi-fi; Bluetooth aptX HD; BluOS; Apple AirPlay 2; Spotify Connect; TIDAL Connect

Outputs subwoofer

Digital audio sample rates 24bit/192kHz
File types AAC; AIFF; ALAC; DSD; FLAC; MP3; MP4; OGG; WAV; WMA; MQA

Dimensions (hwd, cm) 25 × 15 × 19

Weight (kg) 3.7

Finishes matte black; matte white

Price £1,299 per pair

Manufacturer PSB

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UK distributor Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

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T+A Solitaire T wireless headphones

Ed Selley

The recent rather arresting increase in the price of flagship wireless headphones has been one of the more notable changes to the wider headphone market. The natural (and it has to be said, natural but seemingly based on assumptions) cap of £500 that held sway for some time has been abandoned and models are now arriving brandishing four figure price tags. The £1,200 T+A Solitaire T is the most expensive wireless headphone I've yet tested but I imagine that won't be the case for too long.

What makes the Solitaire T notable though is that the on paper specification doesn't appear especially remarkable. A Qualcomm Bluetooth QCC 5127 5.1 platform supports aptX HD and AAC codecs on top of the standard SBC. This is combined with a Sony-derived noise-cancelling program which is on or off rather than the more advanced reactive options that some rivals possess. This suite acts on a pair of 42mm drivers made from cellulose; again, nothing that isn't found at rather more terrestrial price points and a far cry from the extraordinary planar magnetic units used in the flagship Solitaire T.

»

> Comfort is excellent, helped by a decent range of adjustment and well-judged spring force on the head.

T time

Look a little closer though and the T+A starts to become rather more interesting. The decoding path listed above is not the only one that the Solitaire T possesses. Select 'HQ mode' and the decoding configuration changes markedly. The Sony chip powers off and the Bluetooth signal heads off to an ESS DAC for decoding and volume adjustment and the proceeds on to different amplification stages to those used in the more general Bluetooth mode before passing to the drivers. An interesting secondary feature of this mode is that the T+A can also be connected to a USB source via USB C cable and it will decode the signal as a USB DAC.

Nor is the Solitaire T done there. Unlike a number of premium rivals, it is fitted with both USB C (for charging and signal) and an analogue input in the form of a 2.5mm connection (T+A supplies the Solitaire T with both a balanced 2.5mm to 4.4mm cable and a more conventional 2.5mm to 3.5mm one). What T+A is at pains to stress about this arrangement is that it is both entirely passive and that the signal path is different again to the powered ones for noise cancelling and HQ modes. Connect the Solitaire T to a respectable headphone source and the idea is that you will experience its performance and character.

The fact that the Solitaire T is effectively three headphones in one goes some way to explaining the asking price but a more definitive answer comes from unboxing them. Here they are closer to the flagships in terms of approach and aesthetic and I think the decision is a good one. The Solitaire T is made from conventional substances rather than going after the more exotic ends of the material spectrum and instead focuses on putting them together in a wholly confidence inspiring way. The result manages to feel solid and 'worth' their significant outlay. A decent carry case is supplied as well as the two cables.

Reassuringly comfortable

Something that helps the Solitaire T is that the manner it is assembled feeds into a feeling of reassurance wearing and listening to it. Comfort is excellent, helped by a decent range of adjustment and well-judged spring force on the head. Something else that I personally find a bonus is that the Solitaire T can be operated exclusively via the controls on the headphone itself. A control app is in the works but I prefer the means to make quick alterations without reaching for my phone and the Solitaire T is simple too.

The battery life is also impressive. T+A claims no less than 70 hours in standard mode (and a still pretty reasonable 35 in HQ mode) which should be enough for all but the furthest trips into the unknown. Bluetooth stability is also extremely good and the re-connection when powered on is flawless. Absolutely crucial to the proposition the T+A makes is the Solitaire T doesn't leave you wanting when you simply need to commute somewhere and limit your exposure to other people.

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> It isn't the wireless functionality that is the real story here. T+A has built a headphone that genuinely warrants the term 'multirole'.

» It has to be said that the process by which the Solitaire T blocks out those irritating morning conversations people insist on having, is as much mechanical as it is software based. The noise cancelling is effective enough but the significantly less expensive Bowers & Wilkins PX8 is realistically better in this regard. The basics of being able to drown out cabin noise though and avoid altering the tonal balance of the music being played are all handled well though. The frenzied piano work in Nils Frahm's 'Hammers' on his *Spaces* live set keeps it's richness and intensity, even in noise cancelling mode. Absolute bass extension feels slightly curtailed compared to the most talented rivals but it is articulate, detailed and well integrated into the upper registers.

No processing here

There is more to be had from the Solitaire T though. With no processing at work, the T+A does an excellent job of cutting ambient noise and here, it starts to make more sense. On a train where noise levels are lower, you can switch the Solitaire T to HQ mode, still not hear the guy on the phone next to you and start to reap some of the benefits of the Solitaire T's split personality. Frahm's piano gains weight and presence and the space around him becomes something you are more palpably aware of. With vocals, the effect is even more pronounced. Emily King's acoustic version of 'Can't Hold Me Now', has an immediacy and sheer realism that's enough to have you forget there's no wire between you and the source. The standard caveat that not all Bluetooth is created equal applies; meaning that Android owners with Apt-X phones will be more impressed that iPhone owners making do on AAC are likely to be but it's still a seriously impressive performance.

And we still aren't done there either. I genuinely have no idea what the size of the market where people come home and wire their cans to an existing system is but the Solitaire T is exceptional at it. With most of the T+A's significant rivals, the use of an analogue to USB cable tells the story the decoding of the headphone is going to be involved and, however transparent it seeks to be, that will have an effect. The T+A completely avoids this. Listening first via a Chord Hugo2 and 2Go, the largely matter of fact potency of the two units is reflected how the Solitaire T handles Fink's 'Maker'. Play the same track via the rather warmer Yamaha R-N2000A and this makes itself felt in the presentation without any alteration on the part of the Solitaire T. I suspect it would be possible to use it as a device to test a group of headphone amps and make an objectively sound decision as to which one is best.

Worth and value

As a value proposition, it makes that judging the 'worth' of the T+A comes down to how many configurations you see yourself using. I'm willing to stick my neck out and say that, treated strictly as a passive, wired headphone, the T+A will keep Focal's Celestee honest. Given that the Celestee is a significant chunk of the total cost of the T+A, that's no mean feat. Both are closed back designs that give enough of a feeling of space and three dimensionality to their performance to make them viable for home use and the idea that the Solitaire T can mix it with the Focal – a headphone I like very much – is deeply impressive.

Like the T+A, the Focal has more than respectable mechanical isolation but there is no doubt in my mind which of the two I'd pack for a flight. The Solitaire T has become the (current) peak of wireless headphone pricing but that headline rather obscures that it isn't the wireless functionality that is the real story here. T+A has built a headphone that genuinely warrants the term 'multirole.' In two of its use cases; passive wired and wireless noise cancelling, the most talented dedicated rivals will realistically best it but they have no response to the T+A's ability to switch to become something else entirely. Then, in its highest quality wireless mode, the Solitaire T raises the bar further; genuinely giving the best wireless performance I've yet to experience. This is a fascinating and deeply accomplished headphone that can do a remarkable variety of things and excel in most of them. +

Technical specifications

Type Closed back, over-ear wireless and wired headphones with wired, wireless and 'HQ Wireless' modes

Weight 322g

Features 42 mm 'Low tolerance' dynamic driver

Supports Apt-X LL, AAC and SBC Bluetooth

Frequency response 4Hz 22kHz

Price £1,200

Manufacturer T+A Elektroakoustik

www.ta-hifi.de

UK distributor The Audio Business

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Quiescent T100SPA
stereo power amplifier

Jason Kennedy

In the world of power delivery, it has long been recognised that reducing noise is the key to better sound quality. After all electrical power is the lifeblood of any piece of audio equipment and its condition will inevitably affect the sound. Likewise in streaming audio more and more manufacturers are realising that noise is the limiting factor, it's a core reason why streamed audio doesn't always sound as good as it should. When it comes to amplifiers however, where power regulation has been the main means of smoothing out the problems in the electrical juice, the realisation that the main sources of noise need to be addressed more comprehensively seems to be less well accepted in most quarters.

Quiescent realised that radio frequency interference (RFI), electromagnetic interference (EMI) and vibration are major factors in the sound quality of an amplifier. These two pernicious sources of bad sound are everywhere, ever-increasing and evidently not helped by circuits based on old technologies that have been refined but not overhauled over time. Although other technologies are available, the best-known exception is Class D, where switching power supplies have taken over from the established linear alternative but switched mode power supplies (SMPS) have their own problems. This type of supply is found in virtually every household appliance today because it's cheaper and more efficient, but it also produces huge amounts of noise that pollutes the mains that supplies our systems. »

> It's a substantial beauty where every conceivable means of keeping noise and mechanical vibration at bay has been employed.

Transition

Quiescent is the butterfly that metamorphosed from VertexAQ, its MD Nigel Payne (interviewed in issue 196) decided to take the anti-noise tech that was developed under that brand and build it into far more serious and impressively housed components. Quiescent makes a range of devices that are designed to reduce noise and microphony in an audio system, these include loudspeaker modules, balanced mains supplies and a wide range of cables. Many of these are updated versions of the VertexAQ products yet thanks to superbly machined casework look totally different. What's brand new to Quiescent is this range audio electronics, of which there are two power amplifiers – one essentially a doubling of the other into monoblocks – and a streamer.

The T100SPA is Quiescent's stereo power amplifier and it's a substantial beauty where every conceivable means of keeping noise and mechanical vibration at bay has been employed. On the outside you can see that the heatsinks are custom made with cooling tubes running down either flank. Look inside these tubes and there is a helical shape cut into the wall, this is done to break up vibration and differs in each of the 16 cooling tunnels. The top of the chassis is not aluminium, but a composite material called Trespa, they use this in order to avoid creating a Faraday cage which traps RFI produced within the amplifier. This may be the reason why components with non-metal cabinets often sound more relaxed and natural than the conventional alternatives.

Inside this 27kg lump, things get more interesting not least by the virtue of the fact that most elements have their own internal casings and the power transformer has a cap on top of it that forms an absorption matrix. This asymmetric plate is designed to do three things: absorb high frequency noise, disrupt the field around the transformer and kill RF in the bolt that fixes it to the chassis. The cases elsewhere are not metal but are lined with an absorption material to stop interference getting in, they contain Audio Note (UK) Kaisei capacitors for the power supply, DC blocking devices, stacked rectifier bridges with anti-vibration treatment and anti-reflection devices to reduce HF noise. There is only one pair of MOSFETs for each channel, presumably this avoids the timing issues around precisely matching with multiple devices. They produce 130 Watts per channel into eight Ohms which goes up to

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» 200W when the impedance halves to four Ohms. Not a huge number of Watts for the money but this figure is not an indicator of quality, and that is far more important than quantity as you will be aware.

Back panel connections are very high quality WBT types, specifically that brand's Nextgen Ag silver series where metal is kept to a minimum. The speaker cable terminals are from the same range. There are two extra connections on the T100SPA in the form of an RCA socket and a binding post, both of which are provided for grounding purposes which is a Quiescent speciality, I suspect that this is another area that we will see increase in popularity in the future.

As a mouse

It is immediately obvious that the T100SPA is a quiet amplifier from the moment you press play, I was genuinely surprised by how much quieter it is than pretty well all the other amplifiers I have used in recent times. Modern solid-state amplifiers are all pretty good in this respect, none of them hiss or buzz, but this is not as important as the noise floor underneath the music they reproduce. That's where all the fine detail is hidden in many amplifiers. You don't hear it as noise rather it is perceived as coarseness, as a lack of nuance, essentially as a mask to the things that make an amplifier sound transparent. What you get with this amplifier is a clean yet not clinical sound that lets so much detail through and presents it in a totally natural and effortless fashion.

The second thing that hits you is that there appears to be limitless headroom, which is not usually the case with a 130W amplifier unless it's driving 96dB/w/m loudspeakers, e.g., speakers that do not need more than a few Watts. The Quiescent achieves this with Vivid Kaya S12s (87dB) which are not very big, thus not theoretically capable of high sound pressure levels. In fact, it did it with all the speakers I tried including Bowers & Wilkins 802 D3s with their tricky low frequency load. This, one suspects, is because there is so little noise being amplified along with the signal, it gives such a strong sense of ease that the normal cues about loudness, which is essentially perceived distortion, are just not there. This degree of calmness is very rare and usually only achieved with huge amounts of power.

Illumination

The Quiescent makes other amps sound hurried, anxious to get through the music to the next track, and this sense of propulsion can be exciting and entertaining with certain types of music, but it is ultimately a colouration that gets in the way of transparency, reducing it to this degree is quite a revelation. It opens the music up superbly, revealing the depth and dimensionality of the voices and instruments whilst allowing each to be fully expressed, the calmness of the electronics allows the energy of the music to dominate proceedings. I also love the way it reveals layers in good recordings, there are far more than expected in many recent releases.

There are two switches on the back of the T100SPA, one selects between XLR and RCA inputs the other turns the LED in the power switch on and off. I was encouraged to try the latter and was shocked that getting rid of one tiny LED opened up the soundstage so dramatically and increased the sense of ease. I guess you need an indication that the amplifier is on but never felt to turn the LED back on.

Timing is also a strongpoint; there are a number of calm and relaxed amplifiers around that trip up on this critical front, more power often seems to undermine nimbleness and this may be why the T100SPA has a modest output for its class. Whatever the reason the groove was utterly delightful on so many tracks that it was easy to get carried away, this presumably because there is so little noise to blur the transitions between notes and because it has more than enough power to control the loudspeakers in use. It also delivers a huge amount of detail from familiar recordings, stuff that had literally never surfaced before, even on large systems, the shimmer of bells, the timbre of acoustic instruments and voices and the ripples in low bass on favourite pieces.

Audio cake

Quiescent have got to the crux of what it takes to make a truly revealing and even-handed amplifier in the T100SPA. Don't look at its power rating and think you need more, listen to its effortless control of the loudspeaker, and wonder why you would ever need more. That the build quality is also premium grade is the icing on a very tasty audio cake, if I had the funds there would be a real danger of investing in an amplifier that would make so many others sound crude. As a reviewer it would be a disaster. +

Technical specifications

Type Solid state stereo power amplifier

Analogue inputs One pair WBT nextgen Ag silver single ended (via RCA jacks), one pair WBT nextgen Ag silver balanced (via XLR jacks)

Analogue outputs One pair of WBT nextgen Ag silver speaker taps (via 5-way binding posts)

Power output 130Wpc @ 8 Ohms, 200Wpc @ 4 Ohms

Frequency response 0.5Hz–600kHz (-3dB)

Sensitivity 1.6V

Distortion 0.03% at 24W into 8ohm, input 1kHz

Signal to Noise Ratio 120dB

Dimensions (H×W×D) 140 × 440 × 400mm

Weight 27kg

Price £20,000

Manufacturer Quiescent Ltd

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- Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, July/August 2019

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OePhi Reference cables

Alan Sircom

Once upon a time, a very good friend of mine had a cat with the 'somewhat' pretentious name of 'Ophelia'. This is an impossible name for a pet (just try calling 'Ophelia' six times across a garden to call the cat back for food), so it got shortened to 'Oofy'. So, you can imagine, no matter how many times I hear the name of this cable brand, I can't help but associate it with a cat named after Hamlet's wife. Especially as OePhi is a Danish brand designed by engineer and enthusiast Joakim Juhl.

The company began with its Ascendance, Transcendence, and Immanence lines of cables, all of which were notable by their distinctive wide and flat black sheathed cable layout. But, with the company's new Reference line, the secrets beneath the sheath are revealed. Reference looks unlike any other cable, and it makes a good case for being the sound of no cable. But without all the pseudo-Zen philosophical banter.

Yet there be method in't

Sharing little more than a cotton-damped air dielectric, unlike previous cables in OePhi's range, the Reference interconnects and digital cables use pure silver conductors while speaker and power cords use copper. In fact, presume every sentence for a while begins with 'unlike previous cables...' because the OePhi Reference breaks a lot of new ground for audio cables.

The correct spacing geometry is a big issue with the OePhi Reference and wooden spaces are placed at regular intervals across the whole length of each cable. This means entirely separate conductors and the nature of the outer braiding makes these grey cables look somewhat skeletal next to the giant audio hawsers from other brands.

This is amplified (pun intended) by the limited strain relief used in the custom connectors of Reference. Juhl maintains that one of the biggest limitations of a cable of this calibre is at the termination points, as the method of connecting conductor to terminator and the terminator itself can often have more impact on the sound quality itself. The best terminator would be the cable itself, but that's completely impractical. »

> Even those of us who actively try not to use cables as tone controls will find that, "it is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance."

» Instead, OePhi went for terminations with the softest and most conductive metal in the termination itself. This means the plugs – and especially the banana plugs in loudspeaker cables – are less robust than in other cables (even other OePhi cables), but the results can be heard for themselves.

This, however, is one of the few marks against the OePhi Reference. To hear them at their best, they need to be handled with the sort of care that no demonstrator (or reviewer) can give long-term. The Reference can be provided with regular connections of any kind, but that somewhat defeats the object.

It also means the prospective owner must accommodate the cables rather than the other way around. If your equipment is too close to the rear wall, or the bend required to mate component to component is too acute, you risk damaging the cable or connector. But if you are thinking this all sounds like 'deal breaker' material...

To thine own self be true

...guess again. Of all the cables I've heard in my system, I heard the OePhi Reference the least. Many other high-performance cables could be classed as, 'your own system, but with more...' Some are more detailed, some are faster, some are more expressive and so on. The OePhi Reference is simply 'your own system', ungarnished, unalloyed, and untouched by the vagaries of cable 'sound'.

What then becomes clear is just how much we shape our systems by the nature of our cables. Given the Hamlet theme vaguely running through this review, even those of us who actively try not to use cables as tone controls will find that, "it is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance." OePhi Reference doesn't make that tailoring unconscionable, but it does point to another way, and you may find your system follows suit. »

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Paul Rigby
DEEPLY GROOVY 9/10

HiFi PiG MAGAZINE

HI-FI WORLD

The AC-2K Balanced Power Supply

"Balanced mains from the AC-2K must count as one of those one-way dems, where the sonic benefits make switching back to the old normal an unwelcome journey. It offers cleaner, more highly resolving sound along with a mid-band declutter, without any fundamental cramping of pace and dynamics." - Hi-Fi+ Issue 212

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> You might look for a deliberate tonal balance elsewhere, maybe opting for a valve-like sound... tube-y or not tube-y, that is the question.

» I promised a minimum of Zen-noodling earlier, but it becomes almost impossible to resist here. OePhi Reference is the answer to audio's Zen kõan, "what is the sound of no cable?". Of course, such an 'un-cable' demands it partners outstanding audio equipment (more accurately, outstanding audio equipment demands cable partners that do as little as possible to their sonic capabilities... but we are shining this light on cables, after all). However, with OePhi Reference, you find the sonic capabilities of each component in the signal chain are more sharply in focus.

This ultimately means you make better buying decisions in your audio system, without the cable lending its voice to the system. So, for example, you might look for a deliberate tonal balance elsewhere, maybe opting for a valve-like sound... tube-y or not tube-y, that is the question. Sorry.

The rest is silence

The OePhi Reference also redefines those silences between the notes we all crave; which calls into question the current thinking around cables; the importance of eliminating radio frequency and electromagnetic interference. The design of OePhi cables (and Reference in particular) is more about preserving the signal's electrical integrity while preventing mechanical vibration and resonance from one device in the system interfering with another and the signal itself, rather than dealing with 'Electromagnetic Invaders from Beyond'.

The music simply doesn't have a background noise with OePhi, save for tape hiss or pops and crackles introduced by a record. This seems especially true of 'tube rush'; unless you are using a particularly noisy valve on its last legs, that distinctive 'whoosh' behind the music is reduced to the barest minimum when using OePhi Reference.

I'm picking out aspects of performance (or more accurately, aspects *of absence* of performance), but where you really notice the OePhi Reference's sonic 'un-there-ness' is in the gestalt, the whole musical picture, not simply parts of that whole.

You find yourself drawn ever deeper into the music regardless of what that music is. The absence of signature imposed on the system and the cable's ability to keep each component from singing along with the others makes for an intensely immersive, musically honest sound. Moving quickly through all those recordings I use to test audio, I found each was simply reset to being musically enjoyable as well as sonically informative. On CD, all these tracks are so known to me, I find myself saying 'track six' automatically at the first sign of their label, and yet the OePhi Reference opened the whole album to me once more. An album like *Stripped* by The Rolling Stones [Virgin] has been in my review arsenal for years, but I only play track 12 ('Love in Vain'). This time, I found myself playing the whole album end-to-end. The same happened with 'test' albums from Trentemøller, Joyce DiDonato, Cannonball Adderley, and the works of John Pickard, Rachmaninov, and Mahler. This rarely happens and, while I doubt it would happen with *Porn at the Jazzshop*, who knows?

In truth, though, I am at a bit of a loss to describe the performance of OePhi Reference because more than most cables, it doesn't have a performance to speak of. I found myself writing a lengthy description of the performance, only to realise the listening notes were fundamentally identical to those of the Wilson Duette Series 2 and the Hegel Mohican CD player I used in the system. Finding the sound of a cable that strives so hard not to have an influence on sound is not easy!

Express and admirable!

Similarly, it's hard to separate the performance of the individual OePhi Reference cables as they all do so well at removing their imprint from the musical mix. I'd argue that the interconnect cables nudges ahead of the others, but there is almost nothing in it; they all do a fine job in showing up the signatures of other cables.

I think it's fitting that I bludgeoned Shakespeare's finest play into the mix because OePhi Reference is both express and admirable in terms of untrammelled signal delivery. It is also 'to the manner born' in its ability to work with the best in audio, bringing out the best in a system like 'a fellow of infinte jest'. Let's hope it all ends a little better for this Prince of Denmark. Listen to many, speak to a few, and buy OePhi Reference! +

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Platanus 3.0S
moving coil cartridge

Ed Selley

Platanus is a relatively new concern in audio circles with the first models from the company making its appearance in 2020 after nearly a decade of testing and development. Before that, owner and founder Tetsuya Sukehiro was involved in OEM development of cartridges for a number of brands, and also helped design the legendary Miyagi Labs Fuuga cartridge. At a mere 43 years of age, he's one of the younger people involved in this industry (and I take no small delight in someone fractionally older than me being viewed as 'young').

The current Platanus range comprises two models, which are almost identical in terms of their mechanicals. These are outwardly fairly conventional and comprise a line contact stylus mounted on a cantilever made of 2017 Aluminium alloy. Where things begin to get more interesting is that the magnetic section, in which the coil moves is machined from a single block of iron rather than being assembled from multiple pieces in the pursuit of higher rigidity.

Decisions, decisions

This is part of a wider set of design decisions that have been taken to control resonance at every point in the cartridge. A base plate of 6063 Aluminium has been selected and shaped to further stiffen the cartridge as a whole. The 3.0S has a body made of 7075 Aluminium and weighs 11.5 grams less fixings. Meanwhile, the mechanically (and financially) identical 2.0S weighs a hefty 16 grams and is more suited to use in low compliance arms.

The Platanus delivers a useful 0.4mV of output and tracks at 2.0 grams. The exact recommended impedance isn't stated but Sukehiro san feels that the relatively low internal impedance of 2.5 to four ohms suits a loading between 40 and 100 ohms and I've found a 100 ohm setting to work well under testing. Other aspects of the 3.0S are also usefully benign. The body has threaded inserts and benefits from a stylus guard that does a commendable job of actually protecting the stylus. Alignment is also a doddle thanks to flat sides and the pins are usefully spaced too.

Taken as a whole, the resulting cartridge doesn't really feel like a low volume device. Some people shopping for a cartridge at this price might be »

> I've found myself on several occasions absolutely enraptured by how it's handled a track I know well.

» a little underwhelmed by the absence of materials that are either precious, exotic or derived from something now dead and possibly extinct but it gives the Platanus a distinctive feel and identity all its own. It helps that the build and finish of the 3.0S is utterly superb. It may not draw your eye straightaway but when it does, you quickly become aware this is a serious piece of hardware.

In some ways, this is paralleled in the audio performance. Sukehiro san has remarked in the past that his sonic aim is to make devices that 'disappear' into the music that they make and the 3.0S goes a long way to doing just that. Installed on a Vertere MG-1 MkII; a device that is also usefully self-effacing, the result is very much the impression of information making its way out of the groove with little in the way of mechanical process taking place.

Drill down into what the Platanus is doing to achieve this and that becomes a more impressive achievement. First up, there's not a trace of emphasis across the frequency response that would lead you to talk about a 'rich midrange' or 'well emphasised bass.' There is also a seriously impressive level of stereo separation on offer. Play the version of *Berlin Sunrise* from *Fink Meets the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra* and the manner in which the orchestra builds from near silence to full bore is dealt with imperiously by the 3.0S. The absence of drama from the hardware is more than made up for by the successful recreation of drama on the record.

The flat response

This also means that the Platanus has superb tonality across that usefully flat response. Every vocal performance – male and female – was delivered with absolute conviction, and a huge selection of instrumental styles didn't phase it either. That latter, almost throwaway, comment is also noteworthy. On occasions when I've tested cartridges that are the result of a single human being's thoughts and efforts, their preferences have silently embedded themselves in the cartridge itself. In the case of the Platanus, it has delivered everything I have thrown at it without fear or favour. A particularly wayward session that included both the Mark Holliss solo album and *Trois* by Acid Arab failed to discover any weakness to what the 3.0S does.

Something else that's important to stress when talking about this unflappable capability is that the Platanus is still capable of delivering utter joy across your record collection, it simply doesn't have an area where it produces more joy than others. I've found myself on several occasions absolutely enraptured by how it's handled a track I know well.

There are some interesting parallels to the Audio Technica ART20 that I looked at in issue 213 in that the Platanus never makes its exceptional proficiency a hinderance to making you grin like an idiot. Where the 3.0S moves on from the Audio Technica is that those grins have been wider and present across more material. Like a few truly great components I've tested over the years, it asks very little of you while delivering truly outstanding engagement in return.

Of course, there is no shortage of transcendentally talented competition at this sort of price point and some people will find the ethos of the Platanus; from its unshowy design and material choices, through to the even handed way it goes about making music, to be lacking a little drama. For many others though, this is a truly peerless piece of engineering that will grab a disparate record collection by the horns and delight with absolutely all of it. +

Technical specifications

Type Moving Coil Cartridge
Stylus Profile Diamond/Line Contact
Output Voltage 0.4mV (3.54cm/sec)
Frequency Response 10Hz–50kHz
Channel Separation 30dB @ 1kHZ
Tracking force 1.9–2.1g (2g optimal)
Recommended impedance >100 Ohms
Price £5,750

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Mains Voltage... getting it right

Jimmy Hughes

Do you know what your mains voltage is? Probably not. I know mine, but only because I use a connected-fidelity AC-2K balanced mains supply which has a digital readout of the mains input voltage. I was surprised to find my mains voltage was quite high – around the 250V mark.

Indeed, looking back at some pictures I took of the AC-2K in October 2021, I see the voltage displayed was 255V, which is clearly very high indeed. Checking it again just now, in early 2023, it's dropped to around 244V which is more usable...

Get connected

Just to recap, we tested the Connected Fidelity back in issue 212 and gave it an award in 2022. A balanced mains transformer built into a sturdy aluminium chassis with that handy output voltage indicator on its front. In his review, Andrew 'Harry' Harrison concluded the review by saying, "Balanced mains from the AC-2K must count as one of those one-way dems, where the sonic benefits make switching back to the old normal an unwelcome journey. It offers cleaner, more highly resolving sound along with a mid-band declutter, »

> If it were just a handy way of showing my mains voltage, the AC-2K would be useful, but because it offers so much more, it's core to my system now.

» without any fundamental cramping of pace and dynamics." And I agree wholeheartedly.

If it were just a handy way of showing my mains voltage, the AC-2K would be useful, but because it offers so much more, it's core to my system now.

UK and European mains voltage is meant to be around 230V with a tolerance of -6% and +10%. This translates to 216.2V and 253V. So a mains voltage around 250V is still within tolerance limits. But is this important – does it matter? Until quite recently I didn't think so...

Back to the 1960s

However, in 2021 I bought a second-hand Thorens TD-124/II dating from 1966. Back then, European mains voltage was around 220V, with the UK around 240V. Powering a vintage turntable like the TD-124 from a higher UK voltage makes the motor run faster.

It gets worse. Powering the motor at a higher voltage causes the coils to saturate and makes them run hot. I got this info from Thorens experts Schopper AG in Switzerland, who service and refurbish old Thorens decks. They told me the TD-124 motor runs best around 200V.

To help with this, I bought a Variac transformer which allows you to adjust/reduce the mains voltage. It seemed to benefit the 124/II, improving speed stability, reducing motor noise and heat, while making it easier to get the platter turning at the correct speed.

Glowing valves

In November 2022, I treated myself to an Auris Allegro tube amp – bought second-hand from Lithuania. It duly arrived, and I excitedly hooked it up and started to listen. It sounded very good, and I was delighted with my purchase. Then something unexpected happened.

I looked over at the amp and saw one of the four EL-84 power tubes glowing bright orange. Yikes! I switched off immediately to let it cool down, and tried again. The amp played for about 15 to 20min, and the same thing happened – the second tube on the left started to glow excessively.

Thinking the tube must be faulty I tried swapping them over. Before doing so, I numbered the tubes so I knew which was which. But the same thing happened. Any tube fitted to the 2nd base from the left started to glow after 20 minutes. So I knew it wasn't down to a faulty tube...

I contacted the manufacturer in Serbia, but they had no idea why this was happening. Auris no longer have an agent in the UK, but they suggested a repair place in England where I could send the amp to have it checked over.

Nothing wrong here, Mate...

So I sent it away, and the engineer's report came back – no fault found! Fortunately, I had pictures of the glowing tube to prove it wasn't my imagination. I felt there must be a problem with the bias voltage for one of the tubes, but apparently not. The engineer could find nothing wrong.

My guess was – something inside must have worked loose, and the courier trip to the service station had caused it to re-connect. But nothing loose could be found. The repair engineer re-made a few solder »

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> I'd say it's worth checking your mains voltage to see what it is. In most UK homes it will probably be around 245V.

» joints 'just in case' and the amp was returned.

I got the amp back and initially all seemed fine. Whereas before the tube had started to glow after 15m to 20m, the amp now played for an hour and was fine. But then, after an hour and half, one of the tubes – this time, one on the far left – began glowing orange. Rats! What could be the cause?

Remembering my high mains voltage, I connected the Variac transformer and fed the Auris with a reduced voltage around 230V. It seemed to work! I hardly dared believe it at first. But I had the amp running all day for 10 or so hours without a problem, and it's been fine ever since. Ding Dong!

Less glow – less heat

Looking at the power tubes, I could see all four were glowing noticeably less brightly (and putting out less heat) when run at 230V from the Variac. Raising the mains voltage back to 250V, there was a clear increase in tube glow (30% brighter?) and noticeably more heat.

In the past I'd used many tube amps without problems. In the last 12 months or so, I've reviewed models from Jadis, Prima Luna, and Synthesis. I own an EAR 859 and Opera Consonance MS100S Plus. Clearly the Auris Allegro is more sensitive to higher mains voltage than these others.

Recently, I got a Leben CS600X for review. I fired it up and immediately saw one of the tubes glowing much brighter than the others. I feared the worst. But the tube in question was a rectifier valve, not one of the four EL-34 output tubes. It was meant to glow brighter...

Even so, out of curiosity, I tried the CS600X with the Variac transformer set to 230V. This resulted in reduced brightness from the rectifier tube, and a measurable difference in heat. Powered from 250V mains, the temperature above the rectifier was 44F. This dropped to 40F at 230V.

That's a significant difference. Lowering the mains voltage reduces temperatures and should extend tube life. Listening with the Variac, I could hear no adverse change in sound quality. However, you may get a slight increase in maximum power output with a higher mains voltage.

In the light of this, I'd say it's worth checking your mains voltage to see what it is. In most UK homes it will probably be around 245V. That's within tolerance, but with some tube amps and certain older turntables, you may get benefits running at 230V.

I bought my Variac from eBay and chose one with a rating of 500VA and a moving-coil meter, rather than a digital display. It was the cheapest of those on sale, and cost me under £50 with shipping. But having just checked eBay, I could no longer find any UK sellers of Variacs – how strange...

The one I chose is now priced around £66, but with £30 shipping from Spain. You may have to pay 20% import VAT on that too. So the cost will be about £115. +

Technical specifications

Connected Fidelity AC-2K
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Input socket 16 A IEC C20, gold-plated
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Soft-start relay and resettable RCBO
Dimensions 230 × 185 × 330 mm (whd)
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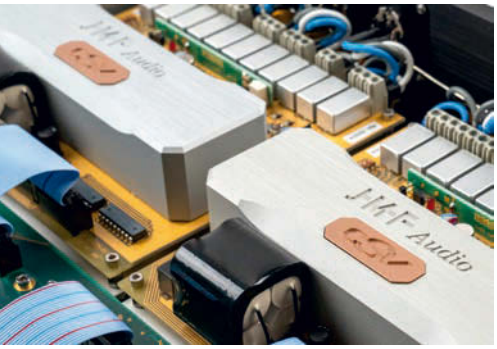

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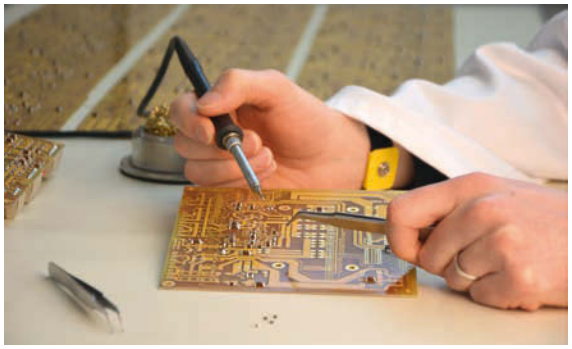

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A Beginner's Guide to… Musique Concrète

Shaun Marin

This month's beginner's guide may anger some readers. Not in an 'East Coast Rap is better than West Coast Rap' kind of way. More in a 'THAT'S NOT EVEN MUSIC!' kind of way. Our recommendations also include a Yoko Ono album, and you can make of that what you will. So, brace yourself for *A Beginner's Guide to… Musique Concrète*.

Let's start with the basics. As the name suggests, Musique Concrète is French in origin. Although its roots go back further, the term is largely credited as the brainchild of Pierre Schaeffer, a polymath who among other talents was a composer, engineer, inventor, broadcaster and entrepreneur.

Hello gramophone!

Musique Concrète was originally conceived in the 1920s, partly as an outcome of the growth in popularity of the gramophone. This new medium freed up compositions from the limitations of what could be recreated in concert halls around the world. Instead, progressive composers as notable as Igor Stravinsky and Henry Cowell began considering how to compose specifically for the gramophone.

One of these new creative opportunities was the ability to use recorded sound as the raw materials for compositions, and Musique Concrète describes exactly that. These sounds could be absolutely anything – from standard instruments and voices to field recordings, snatched moments of radio broadcasts, people reading excerpts from books and a million things in between. Rather than straight reproductions of recordings, Musique Concrète takes these sounds and manipulates them in a variety of different ways to create the compositions.

This compositional approach was codified by Pierre Schaeffer, who founded the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète together with its own studio, allowing composers to explore the technologies available in post-war France. The results, considering the time and place, are astounding, and still warrant repeat listening today.

As technology developed, so the fields of possibility widened. The development of magnetic tape recording, the emergence of controllable turntables and constant improvements in microphones allowed this small group of composers to create increasingly complex and beautiful soundscapes – an apt phrase, as much of the work they produced is the perfect foil to concurrent developments in cinema.

Interestingly considering the pair are closely linked and many of the recordings we recommend below are classified as 'Electronica' by the major streaming services, Musique Concrète was named to differentiate it from Elektronische Musik, which is music derived totally from electronic sources. The latter was very much the domain of German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, who we skirted around in our guide to Kraut Rock last year, and appears again in our recommendations below.

But apart from the technology used, what makes Musique Concrète stand out even further from more mainstream compositions, and at times puts it up there among the most challenging genres, is that it doesn't obey the standard rules of composition. When composing in this genre there's no need to trouble yourself with concepts of melody or harmony, or any of those other elements that usually go into what constitutes music.

Still challenging expectations

While Musique Concrète has to a large extent been subsumed by its completely electronic cousin – why use real sounds when you can pretty much synthesise any sound you can think of using computers – adhering to the challenges of the format has continued to appeal to a constant stream of composers and musicians who are up for the challenge, including some we have recommended below.

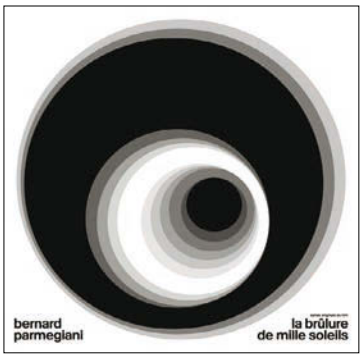
Musique Concrète has also had a massive influence beyond the strict confines of the rules laid down by Pierre Schaeffer. Early Hip-Hop's use of twin turntables for example, and innovative acts such as The Art Of Noise who made inspired use of the techniques developed earlier in the last century.

That's why our selection of a dozen Musique Concrète albums covers a wide expanse of time, and showcases an even wider collection of artistic visions. +

Symphonie Pour Un Homme Seul: Concerto Des Ambiguités

Pierre Henry & Pierre Schaeffer (Philips, 1972)

This 1950 'symphony of noise' is a joint work by two of the founders of the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète, produced using turntables and mixers. The '*Symphony for One Man Alone*' still confounds accepted norms today. Physical recordings are hard to come by, but the full 21-movement version is available to stream in high-resolution on most services.



La Brûlure De Mille Soleils

Bernard Parmegiani (WRWTFWWR, 1965)

Bernard Parmegiani was a student of Pierre Schaeffer, and this is one of his first compositions in what would be a prolific lifetime of work in the world of electronics and soundtracks, such as this work, and the corporate world including the announcements at Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport. Parmegiani has been cited as a major influence for the likes of Aphex Twin and Sonic Youth, and listening to this extraordinary work you will instantly know why.

Hymnen für elektronische und konkrete Klänge

Karlheinz Stockhausen (DG, 1969)

In this seminal piece, Karlheinz Stockhausen takes recordings of some 40 national anthems – 'Hymnen' is German for 'anthem' – and smashes them together to create something absolutely unique, where snippets of the familiar tunes clash with the sound of tape machines and electronics. Annoyingly, this two-hour recording is actually pretty tricky to get hold of, so good hunting!

Reverberations: Tape & Electronic Music 1961–1970

Pauline Oliveros (Important Records, 2014)

Pauline Oliveros was a true innovator from the early 1960s until her death in 2016. A founder of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, she dedicated her creative life to pushing the boundaries of musical composition, initially with her beloved tape machines but increasingly with other electronic equipment. This sensational compilation perfectly encapsulates her earliest Musique Concrète work.

»

Unfinished Music No. 2: Life With the Lions

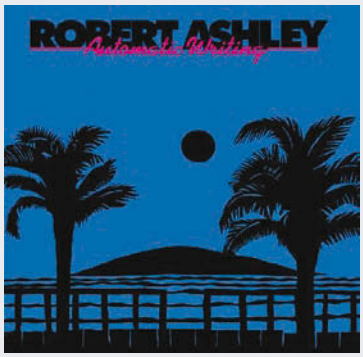
Yoko Ono & John Lennon (Apple 1969)

Oh my, a Yoko Ono album! Who would have thought such a thing would ever appear in a recommended list in these pages. But in the context of Musique Concrète, Ono's radical art-house compositions are worthy of your time. Okay, when compared to much of the rather mellow, drone-heavy, field recordings that you'll find elsewhere in this list *Unfinished Music No. 2* is a bit shouty, but its chaotic mix of found sound and post-Beatles noodling is at times hypnotic.

Worlds Within Worlds, Pts. 1-2

Basil Kirchin (Columbia, 1971)

Basil Kirchin is an unsung hero of the British avant-garde scene. Originally a drummer, Kirchin began experiments in sonic manipulation and the use of field recordings. Then in the mid-70s, he got fed up with the whole recording industry and went into semi-seclusion – albeit the kind of seclusion where he continued to make music. *Worlds Within Worlds* captures him at his creative best and is a masterpiece of early 1970s experimentalism.



Automatic Writing

Robert Ashley (Lovely Music, 1979)

Automatic Writing by Robert Ashley is haunting – an exploration of the meaning of language, comprising recordings of Ashley's own hardly discernible, involuntary speech (he suffered from a mild form of Tourette's), and what sounds like the kind organ music you might expect to hear in crematorium as the congregations gathers before the service, but recorded from outside the room. The result is utterly mesmerising.

Paysages Planétaires

Henri Pousseur (Alga Marghen, 2000)

Belgian composer Henri Pousseur spent his whole life experimenting with Musique Concrète and electronic recording techniques, and created a host of wonderful works for you to enjoy. But to my mind this three-hour-long work is his masterpiece; a heady mixture of field recordings and magnetic tape manipulation, there's no other way of describing it without resorting to the obvious cliché – it takes you on a journey!

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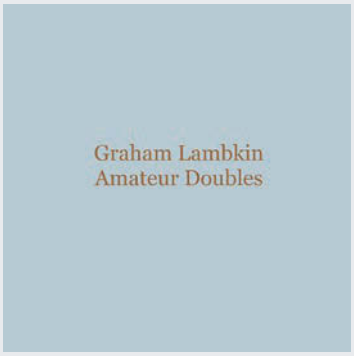
Acousmatrix – The History of Electronic Music IV

Henri Pousseur (BV Haast, 2004)

This CD compilation was released at the turn of the century. Pousseur was a disciple of Stockhausen in Cologne, and worked across a wide variety of musical forms, including 1957's *Scambi*; a wonderful exploration of how magnetic tape can be used to create a thoroughly engaging acoustic experience. Also note *Paraboles-Mix* which clocks in at 40 minutes (on the CD) and sounds incredible, too.



Amateur Doubles

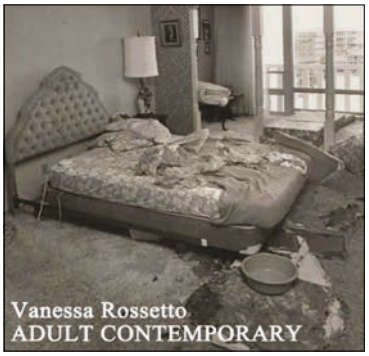
Graham Lambkin (Kye, 2011)

Taped largely in a Honda Civic, *Amateur Doubles* is an intimate portrait of an oft-overlooked domestic stage: the car journey. Lambkin captures the sounds of a family-in-motion as they fiddle with windows, play with toys, bicker, pass traffic, and listen to French Prog. The simplicity of the concept holds moments of increased tension that, if you were watching a thriller rather than listening to music, would give you a reason to fear for the safety of the passengers!

Ultimate Care II

Matmos (Thrill Jockey, 2016)

If you want to understand how the recorded sound of everyday items can be musical, then this is the place to start. Matmos use only the sounds created by a Whirlpool Ultimate Care II washing machine in their basement to create this album, including the sounds of it being beaten, hit and stroked! What this album has that many of the others here don't is rhythm, and it takes you beyond what the original source sounded like and leaves you enjoying 38 minutes of magic.



Adult Contemporary

Vanessa Rossetto (No Rent Records, 2016)

Vanessa Rossetto is living proof that Musique Concrète is alive and well, and this 2016 recording is a great place to start. A two-track work that combines electronics and manipulated field recordings, it is one of the most immersive works in this whole feature. It draws you into the events going on in the world around the recording device, engaging your mind and emotions in a way that some of the more technically cold works struggle to match.

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Billy Valentine

Sean Hannam

Billy Valentine and The Universal Truth, the latest album by veteran US soul singer and songwriter, Billy Valentine, is the first record of new music on the iconic jazz label, Flying Dutchman, since 1976.

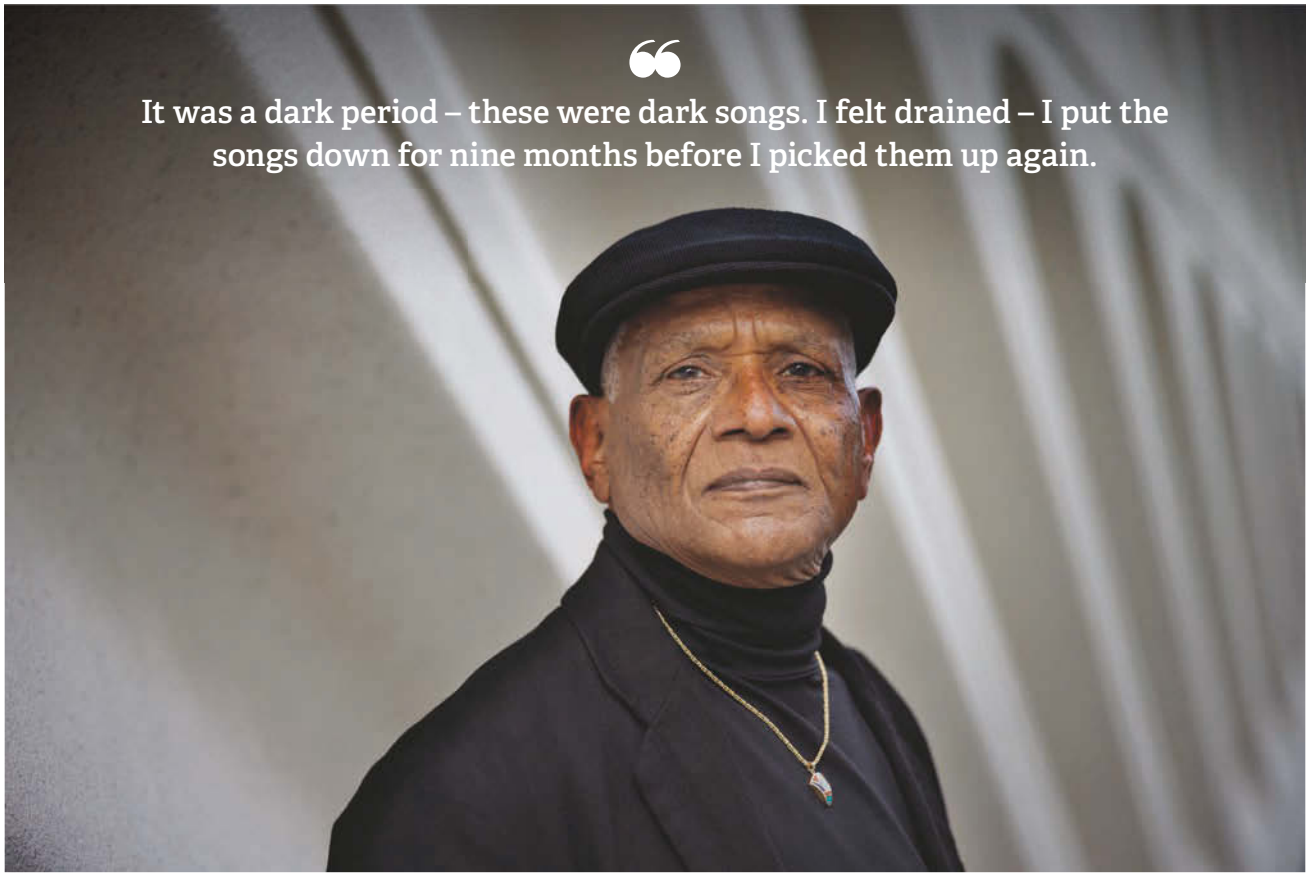
Started by Bob Thiele in 1969, the label put out music by acts including Ornette Coleman, Leon Thomas, Gil Scott-Heron, Count Basie and Lonnie Liston Smith.

When Flying Dutchman was founded, it was during the era of '60s counterculture and black power, so it seems fitting that for the label's comeback album by Valentine – thanks to a collaboration with Acid Jazz – those involved have chosen a record made up of eight moody message songs, including Valentine's stunning jazz-soul interpretations of tracks by Scott-Heron, Curtis Mayfield, Prince, Stevie Wonder, Eddie Kendricks, Pharoah Sanders and War.

Recorded at the legendary East-West Studios in Hollywood, the album features jazz luminaries Immanuel Wilkins (saxophone), Theo Crocker (trumpet), Jeff Parker (guitar), Larry Goldings (piano) among others, as well as acclaimed session bassist, Pino Palladino.

Valentine is based in L.A. and, in 1982, as one half of the Valentine Brothers, with his brother, John, wrote and recorded 'Money's Too Tight (To Mention)', which went on to become a hit for Simply Red three years later.

hi-fi+ asks him how his new album came to be released on the resurrected Flying Dutchman label. »



“My dear friend and producer, Bob Thiele Jr, whom I’ve been working with for close to 40 years – we’ve written songs together – came to me during the pandemic and he said he wanted to relaunch his father’s label and that he wanted me to be the first artist on it,” he says.

“I was pretty honoured by that, and I’ve always thought that if anybody was going to be the perfect producer for me, it would be Bob Thiele Jr.

“We’d just come out of isolation and there was the George Floyd thing and Black Lives Matter, so when he brought me the songs, like ‘Home Is Where The Hatred Is’ and ‘The Creator Has A Master Plan’, they truly resonated with me and seemed very fitting for 2019 /2020. Once we got in the studio, it felt like the perfect storm.”

SH: How were the sessions for the album?

BV: It was great doing this project, but when you’re dealing with your soul down there and you’ve just seen George Floyd get killed on television, and when you’re putting yourself into the songs, it burns you out.

It was a dark period – these were dark songs. I felt drained – I put the songs down for nine months before I picked them up again.

Bob said, ‘Hey, man – I think we’ve got something very good here’, and eventually I started listening to them again and I was very surprised at how it came out.

I’m very proud of it and I think it’s the best record I’ve done because of what it’s saying – I really had something to say. I had a voice and I wanted to use it. I wanted to scream out and say, ‘what’s going on now is unjust’.

Had you worked at East-West Studios before?

Absolutely – I’d done a record for Atlantic there, produced by Stewart Levine, that didn’t get released. It was a solo album.

I’ve done sessions there – I worked with Ringo Starr. I’ve been in that studio many times.

The making of this record was so easy in terms of everyone being there for me – I was surrounded by brilliant cats.

The songs you’ve chosen to record on the album are still very relevant today even though some of them were written in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. Does it make you sad that some things haven’t changed? Is it a case of history repeating itself?

Exactly – that’s the way I felt. I felt like I was back in the ‘60s – I was there during that era. I can remember when Gil was putting those songs out – I was about to be drafted for the Vietnam War. I avoided it because I’m my father’s oldest son – they wouldn’t take me.

You’ve put your own spin on the songs – your version of Prince’s ‘Sign of the Times’ is jazzy, but the original is much more electronic…

Yeah – I was just feeling it, man, those words and all – I hadn’t done that style before, with those kinds of words.

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> Somewhere deep down inside, I think I was always a bit afraid of that – of becoming really famous. I just wanted to be a part of the conversation.

» I love a challenge and with Prince's melodies, you can't go wrong.

It's a great album – your voice and the arrangements are wonderful.
The musicianship… I give Bob Thiele Jr all the credit, man – he brought the right people in and he allowed us the freedom.

He said, 'Man, just let 'em play'. Do you know what I mean? And that fitted with me, pretty much. I was singing a bit differently on this record than I've ever sung before. I am a bit more jazzy but my soul is still gonna be there.

Your most famous song is 'Money's Too Tight (To Mention)', which you wrote about the Reagan era in US politics. There's always been a sociopolitical side to your music, hasn't there?
Yes – I think that's who I am. I look at myself as a messenger – there was social commentary with 'Money's Too Tight.'

I felt that was the wagon I was supposed to get on – most of my writing, which nobody has heard yet, is all social commentary. They're songs that speak to the human condition.

I've got a song called 'I've Seen Enough To Know' – I wrote that with Jeff Silbar, who [co-]wrote 'Wind Beneath My Wings.'

Can you remember how you wrote 'Money's Too Tight (To Mention)?'
My brother, John, came up with the title. He started writing the song – we were in a musical called *The Wiz*. We'd travelled around the country with that show for three and a half years, and we got laid off from work, which is the first line of the song.

It was a real situation – we can only write about what we know. Money was

too tight to mention at that time. When John and I write together, it comes pretty fast – it's a family thing.

Did you like the Simply Red version?
Oh, are you kidding me? How could I not?

I guess when they had a hit with it, money wasn't quite so tight for you…
[*Laughs.*]

You've co-written with Will Jennings, and written for Ray Charles and the Neville Brothers, and you've sung demo versions of tracks for songwriters like Bacharach and David and Gerry Goffin. Can you tell me how that came about?
That's how Bob and I came together. John and I had started to drift and go our separate ways, so I hooked up with Bob and he and I started writing. We had another guy join us – Phil Roy.

I was always singing songs for Bob because he had a publishing deal with Warner Chappell.

All the other writers started to hear my voice and they started using me – that was a career in itself because you'd learn to initiate yourself into a song for five to seven minutes, and it becomes a part of you. Being a demo singer opened up many doors – it taught me how to sing differently. I sang songs I would never have sung because I was singing for pop writers. I did stuff with Gerry Goffin – I loved Gerry – and I did stuff with Burt Bacharach. There's an album of Burt's that I'm on.

Did you ever wish you'd become more of a household name?
Somewhere deep down inside, I think I was always a bit afraid of that – of becoming really famous. I just wanted to be a part of the conversation.

I've done soundtrack work in films and television but most of that has been behind the scenes – I've enjoyed it immensely.

Has recording the new album persuaded you to make more records?
It has – and it's got me into writing again. I'm thinking of the songs that I have in the can, and I'm writing a couple of songs with a friend in Paris right now. He'll send me tracks and if I feel it and get into it, I'll put a vocal on it and send it back. We'll cut it – he comes to L.A. quite a bit.

Anyone you'd like to write for?
I got to write for my idol – Ray Charles. That was such a great gift, man, and he named the album after my single – *'My World.'*

I never thought as myself as a writer – I thought of myself as a messenger and a singer. I just got lucky. +

Billy Valentine and the Universal Truth is out now on Flying Dutchman / Acid Jazz.
www.billy-valentine.com

Billy Valentine is playing at The Forge in Camden, London on April 7 and 8.

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The Long Ryders

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Sean Hannam

US band The Long Ryders could lay claim to founding the Americana / alt-country movement when they formed in L.A. in the early '80s.

The rock 'n' roll and Paisley Underground outfit split up in 1987 but got back together several times in the Noughties and in 2019 released their first album in 32 years – *Psychedelic Country Soul*.

Its follow-up, *September November,* is out now and it's a much more varied record than its predecessor, with a pounding, sociopolitical guitar-fuelled anthem ('Elmer Gantry Is Alive And Well'), haunting and stirring, *'Desire'*-era Bob Dylan folk-rock ('September November Sometime'), the Gene Clark-like 'Seasons Change', cowboy country ('Hand of Fate'), Byrdsy and Beatlesesque psych-rock, ('Flying Out Of London In The Rain') and a McCartney-style 'granny song' ('That's What They Say About Love').

Sadly, the group's bass player, Tom Stevens, died in 2021 – there's a tribute to him on the new album, the poignant, mandolin-laced ballad, 'Tom Tom.'

London-based frontman, Sid Griffin, who, along with his current bandmates, Stephen McCarthy and Greg Sowders, is one of the three founding members, says of *September November*: "It's two thirds the distilled alt-country genre we helped found back in the 1980s, one third Paisley Underground adventurism yet seasoned with a dash of our own crazed soulfulness thrown in."

hi-fi+ got him on the phone to find out more.

SH: September November is your first album in four years.
SG: I believe so.

The last one, Psychedelic Country Soul, was your first record since 1987, so you're on a roll now...
Yeah – that's true.

You've worked with producer Ed Stasium again. Why did you choose him?
Ed is the fifth Long Ryder, but now that Tom Stevens is deceased, he's the »

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Andrew Harrison reviewed the USB II-R cable in **hi-fi+** issue #217 (pages 84–86). He wrote, "The first CAD USB cable was previewed some 10 years ago and was originally known as the Revelation. The ground-breaking design was updated in 2018 with two variants known simply as USB I and USB II. More recently, CAD designer Scott Berry's aim was to provide an improved differential signal data cable by addressing voltage noise in the system, focusing on reducing unwanted RF noise from being inadvertently passed from source (PC) to DAC by conductive USB cable".

He went on to say, "The principles behind the CAD USB cable have been peer reviewed… leading to a GB patent award. A summary of the patented invention follows. Four main aspects differ from a conventional cable. The +5V wire, not even required by most hi-fi DACs, is literally distanced from the data lines by running external to the main trunk. The power ground line is RF filtered through a series inductor and/or resistor. One end of the outer screen is left unterminated. And the critical signal lines pass through a common-mode noise rejection choke".

He concluded the review by saying, "The USB II-R is now the cable that can preserve the most authentic account of the music so far, acting almost like an analogue conduit from PC to DAC. Against any known contender, this winner takes them all." +

Competition question

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The competition will run from April 6th 2023 until June 1st 2023. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible) and their name will be published in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd. is compliant with the Data Protection Act and UK laws apply. Our policy is such that we will not pass on your details to any third party without your prior consent.

> We demoed the songs back and forth and we recorded the album in July last year. We learned the songs before we got there, so we didn't waste any time.

HENRY DILTZ

» fourth. When you go to his house, he has gold and platinum records on the wall for Living Colour, Soul Asylum, The Smithereens, The Jeff Healey Band…

And he worked with The Ramones…
Yes – they're his biggest claim to fame. I don't know why I forgot them! In the mid-'7os, he started working with Phil Spector for 10 or 15 years. He was his main engineer – he took the place of the legendary Larry Levine, who worked with Spector in his 1960s glory days. Ed really knows his stuff, plus he has the same musical and cultural references that The Long Ryders do. Sometimes if you're talking to a producer who has different musical tastes or a different background, what can happen is that you say to the guy, 'I want it to sound like such and such a record', and he doesn't know it... That's not a problem with Ed – he completely understands what we're talking about. It's a big relief and we're very much at home working with him.

You made the record at his Kozy Tone Ranch studio in California…
Yeah – it's his home studio and it's a really nice place. It just worked out really well – I don't know what else you can say about it. We demoed the songs back and forth and we recorded the album in July last year. We learned the songs before we got there, so we didn't waste any time.

I got there really early on the first day. I thought the traffic would be bad travelling from Los Angeles, where I had stayed for a few days to visit people. I used to live in L.A. in the '80s. Ed wasn't ready – he was in the shower – and his family were there. It was embarrassing. That afternoon »

> Some bands lose a member and that's it, but some crack on, like The Stones who still have two of the original guys.

HENRY DILTZ

» we just mainly hung out and talked, getting to know each other again. Then we had a big jam session in the living room, with Ed on Hammond organ – that was a lot of fun.

The next morning, we reconvened about 11 and started working – it's the way to go. It was a bit like *The Basement Tapes* with Dylan – we were in someone's home and you're literally set up in his living room and parts of his house, like the den and the kitchen, for whatever sound it is.

After the sessions, if Ed doesn't have anything else on for a few weeks, he tears all the stuff down and puts it in the closet, which must be a total pain in the butt.

We've recorded in big-name, formal studios, like A & M in Hollywood and Chipping Norton in Britain, which I think is now a condominium, but now we've recorded in someone's home with the same equipment lying around… There's something about recording in a home that's easier, warmer and better.

You mentioned Tom Stevens, your bass player, who died in 2021. How was it making the new album without him? Did you ever think that the band wouldn't carry on after his death?

Yes – we were trying to figure out if we wanted to do it anymore. The guy had been our bass player since Christmas Eve 1983. Some bands lose a member and that's it, but some crack on, like The Stones, who still have two of the original guys. There was something weird about it and we did have a long look in the mirror, but it just made sense to go on – everybody said we should keep going. I think we've made a really terrific record, partly inspired by the loss of Tom Stevens and wanting to honour his memory and not drop the ball. I argued for doing it and I told the guys that if we made a mediocre record we could either put the best songs out as an EP, or if we didn't have any good songs, we could just skip it. We didn't have to make a record – there was no gun to our head. Now that we've got Cherry Red Records behind us in the way in which they are, I'm pleased that we cracked on. It's a really good record – everyone likes it.

What's the band's songwriting process like?

If I can't finish a song, I give it to Stephen or he'll give it to me – we don't sit down and write together much anymore because he lives in the United States and I live in London. He might have half or three quarters of a song and he'll ask me to finish it. He polishes some of mine and I polish some of his. If your name's first [on the credits] it's more or less your song.

Was the first single from the album, 'September November Sometime', a co-write?

I did the lion's share of it and then Stephen took over.

I love the lyric from it, 'Calling out across the world, are you ready for a brand new tweet?' It's a twist on a line from 'Dancing In The Street' by Martha and the Vandellas, isn't it?

It's amazing how many people don't get that. A lot of my songs have a pun based on a line from a previous rock song. You got that because you have a certain depth of knowledge about music.

'September November Sometime' mentions social media and 'Elmer Gantry Is Alive And Well' is the album's most political song…

'Elmer Gantry…' is mostly Stephen's song. I just dotted some i's and crossed some t's.

It reminds me of 'I'm Waiting For The Man' by the Velvet Underground…

I thought that too.

And there's a bit of vintage Long Ryders in there, some '60s electric Dylan and some mid to late '80s R.E.M, who were contemporaries of yours…

It's funny – we're probably the only band of our era who didn't play with R.E.M. »

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> Psychedelic country soul – that's our bag. We're very proud of the new album but it is coloured or flavoured by the loss of Tom Stevens.

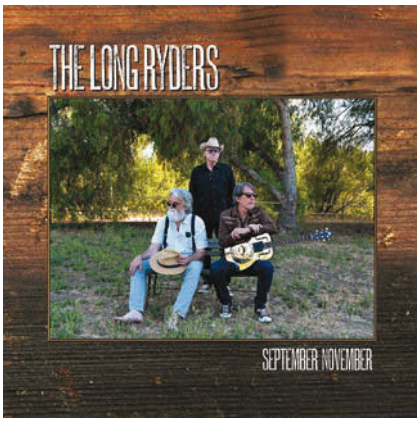
That's surprising.
We were never on the same bill as them, but I saw them a bunch of times and I know Stipe and Buck. They're the most social people on Earth – everyone knows them. I'm quite a fan of R.E.M and they are something of an influence. Their last album, *Collapse Into Now*, was terrific. It's kind of odd when a band your age – or younger – is an influence, but you've got to open your ears and not have prejudices against things.

I love 'Seasons Change' on the new record – it has that classic Paisley Underground feel and it's like The Byrds and Gene Clark...
It's one of Stephen's. We voted on which songs go on the album – I don't think there was a vote against 'Seasons Change.' Everyone agreed it was just a great song and we had to put it on the record. It vaguely sounds like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

I think 'Hand of Fate' sounds like a Marty Robbins gunfighter ballad...
That's a Stephen song and he'd be very flattered by that. We're big Marty Robbins guys – we love his music.

This album is like a mini *Exile On Main St.* – we've got rock 'n' roll and we wanted to do some acoustic, stripped-down things, with Stephen and I, and Greg on a snare with brushes. We've never had time to do some lighter things before.

The new album is more varied than Psychedelic Country Soul...
That was on purpose – we've done what we've done, people like it or they don't. We'll always have the 'Looking For Lewis and Clark' or 'Elmer Gantry'-style pounding songs, but we wanted to expand the net.



'That's What They Say About Love' is an uncynical, old-fashioned country song, but it almost feels like a show tune, or 'When I'm 64' by The Beatles...
Bingo! You hit it. Why are The Beatles more popular than The Rolling Stones? It's Paul McCartney – or what the American record industry calls 'the grandma effect'. At the end of the day, there are very few Stones songs that housewives or grandmothers like. The Beatles had 'Your Mother Should Know', 'When I'm 64', 'Michelle' and 'Yesterday' – grandmothers bought some Beatles songs. I thought, 'why don't we have any grandmother songs?' There are three guys in the band who are still alive and kicking and each one's happily married, so why don't we have more songs about romance, love and devotion? The main subject matter of popular music is romance, so here we go – we're dipping our toes into the water. I love the song – I'm very proud of it.

The song 'Tom Tom', which is a tribute to Tom Stevens, is really touching. I like the lines 'Tom Tom – the bottom end is gone... Tom Tom he was the quiet one.'
Greg, our drummer, who isn't our main songwriter by any stretch, dreamed it – the lyrics came to him in a dream. Stephen got a melody together and I wrote the bridge. It was kinda like 'Free As A Bird' [by The Beatles], when Paul McCartney polished off a John Lennon song and added a bridge with George Harrison's help.

The last song on the album, 'Flying Out Of London In The Rain' was written by Tom Stevens – it was on his 2007 solo album Home – and he sings and plays on it...
It's a cracking record and it didn't do nearly as well as it should've done when it came out. I said we should do one of Tom's songs so he had a presence on the new album. I picked the four of five Tom songs that sounded the most Long Ryders and the guys voted for 'Flying Out Of London In The Rain.' It was written about him quitting the band in summer 1987, before we threw in the towel – we cracked on until December – so it was a hell of a poignant song for us to pick.

It's very haunting and atmospheric, with a Beatles and Byrds-like guitar solo. It's a psychedelic country rock ballad...
Psychedelic country soul – that's our bag. We're very proud of the new album but it is coloured or flavoured by the loss of Tom Stevens. You can't get back together. Grimly enough, if another Long Ryder dies, that's the end of the line. We recorded five more songs than we needed for *September November*, so we've got half of another album in the can. If Tom was alive, we'd probably have even more than that. +

September November by The Long Ryders is out now (Cherry Red Records) on CD and vinyl.
www.thelongryders.com
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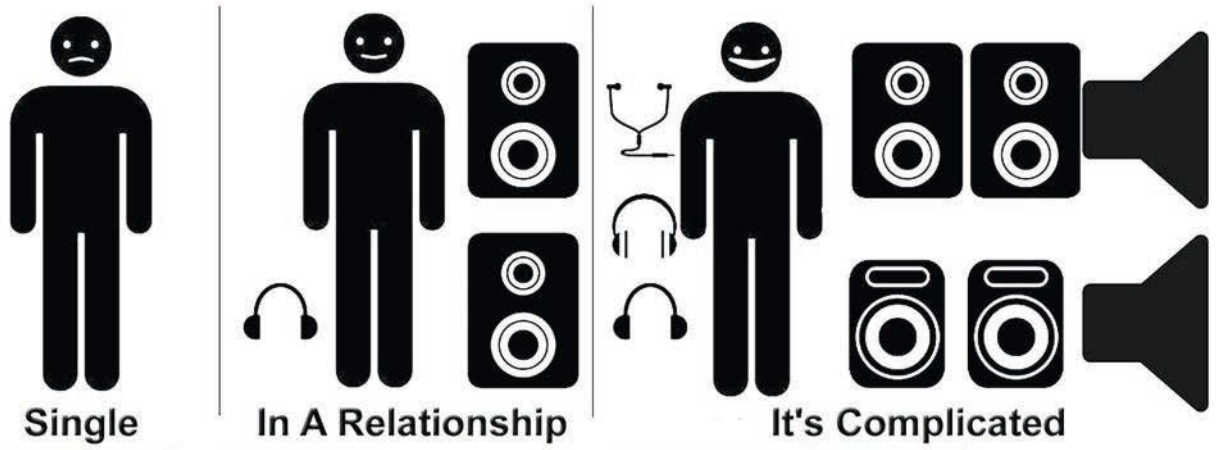
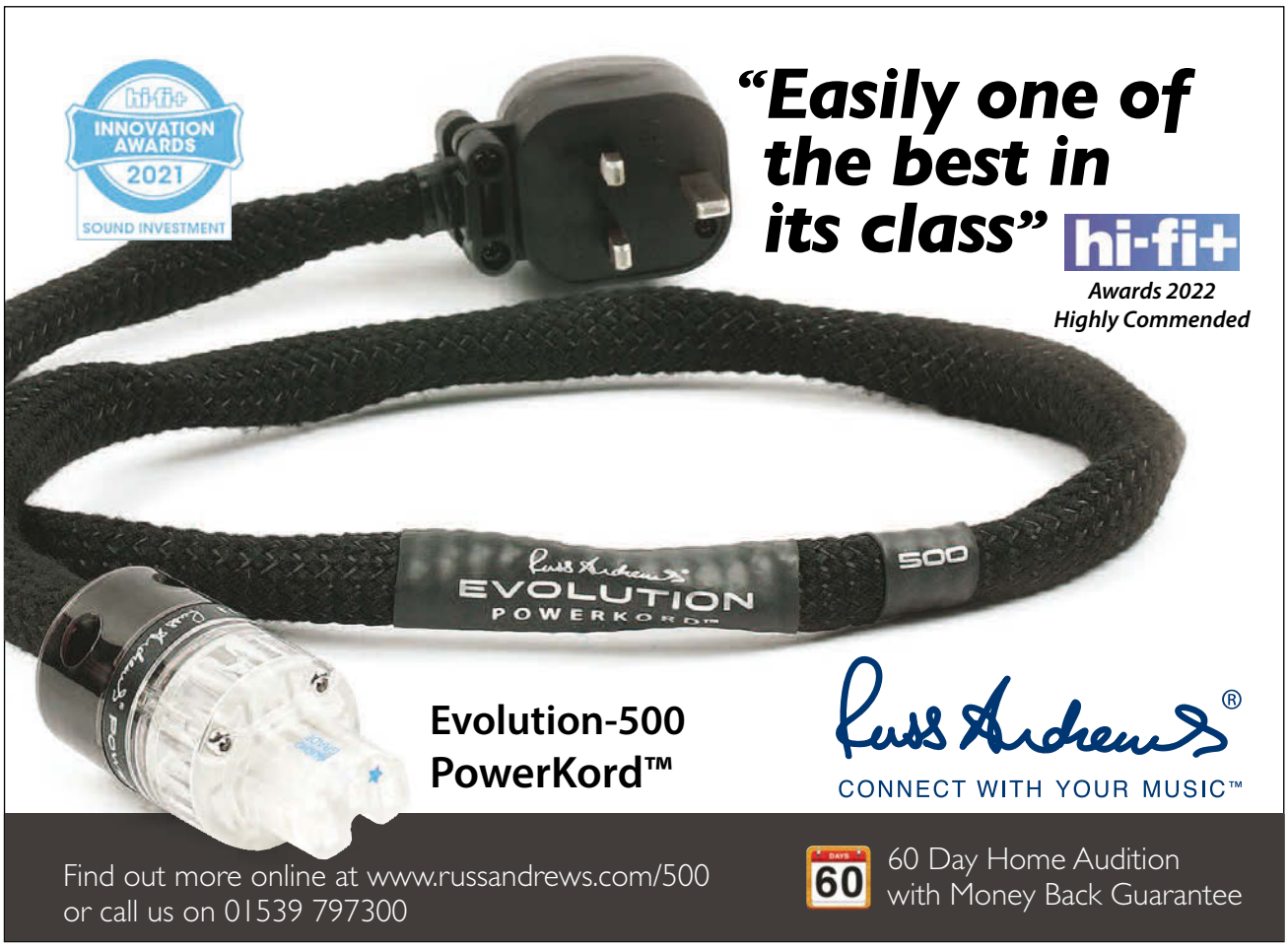




Contemporary, classical and audiophile music

Music reviews: how we rate them

Unlike many music reviews, we strive to make music reviews that cover both musical and sonic quality. This means we don't just listen to the album on a pair of laptop loudspeakers, but listen to the recording the way it was supposed to be played… through a damn good audio system. Our rating for sound quality reflects that performance; while a highly rated recording still might be some way away from 'demonstration quality' (those rare recordings will be highlighted as such in the text itself), it will still be extremely good enough to show off and challenge your system.

Changing formats and defining genres

The way we access music has forever changed. While many still collect physical media of all kinds, high-resolution downloads and streamed music have become the main ways people acquire music today. This is both good and bad; having 'always-on' access to the entire musical canon is awesome, but some recordings vary in quality depending on provider, and the ability to search for jazz and especially classical works can be very variable. As such, our classical reviews remain steadfastly on disc for now. But don't be surprised if what might be a sublime recording on one format is merely 'OK' on others.

Again, where possible we will highlight such differences, but bear in mind that when it comes to streamed formats, the album may differ from country to country.

Of course, the main point of buying music is to listen to music, and not simply the sound it makes. Our resident music-lovers are all experts in their respective fields. Their recommendations are based both on the music itself, the musicianship, and where it sits in that genre. We also cherry-pick our records before publication, so only the best of the best make the cut. That way, an album that gets an all-round five-stars for music and sound quality is something very special indeed. +

This issue's featured reviewers are:

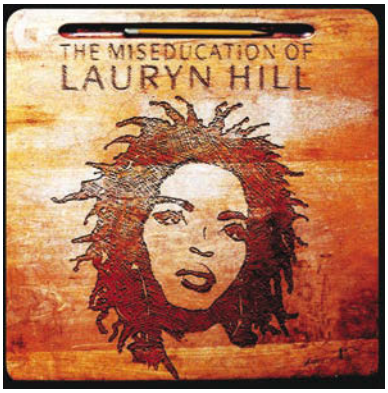
Michael Vámos
The first album I bought was by Earth, Wind and Fire. I like many genres; indie-rock, alternative music, rock, blues, new wave and R&B; from Talk Talk, Tom Waits and Nick Cave to Depeche Mode, The National, Band of Horses to Domenique Fils-time.

Sean Hannam
I have been writing about music for over 25 years. A big fan of indie (once got to interview Johnny Marr!), Americana, '60s rock/pop and cult film/TV soundtracks, I also run a successful music blog, discovering new sounds and collecting albums.

Jason Kennedy
Like Jagger, "I was born in a crossfire hurricane" and have been diverted by music ever since. First it was Led Zeppelin and the Clash and now it's Frank Zappa, Joni Mitchell, Keith Jarrett, Ryley Walker, Nina Simone, Charlie Mingus, Bugge Wesseltoft, Tortoise…

Shaun Marin
The key for me is discovery. I love the sounds of my youth, but I hate the nostalgia circus. What's happening in areas like UK jazz and the modern alternative scene is more exciting than anything that has come before.

Jimmy Hughes
I acquired a taste for classical music in my early teens. I particularly enjoy symphonic, chamber, and instrumental music from the 19th century. Recently, I've become especially enamoured by the late works of Franz Schubert.



Lauren Hill

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill ◗ Ruffhouse/Columbia ◗ CD × 2, vinyl, download

Recording ★★★★☆ Music ★★★★½

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill from 1998 is a great album, with lots of enlightening lyrics backed by great music. Lauryn Hill deliberately tries to influence her listeners with her lyrics, often using her own life's successes and failures as foundations for her songs.

Each track is divided by short "urban classroom scenarios" where students chime in on subjects Lauryn Hill considered important – Love!

When this album hit the streets, I had given up on R&B. Then at a gym in SoHo, Manhattan, the same kind of cool rhythms laid out by Marvin Gaye and others, seemed to have come alive again. While Hill's album is inspired by hip-hop and other genres current in the late 1990s, the real gems on this album are the R&B love songs, littered intermittently throughout her magnum opus.

There are no bad tracks on this album. Hill sets herself apart from the hip-hop genre of the time and masterfully manages to mix R&B to create a landmark solo album. Don't worry, even if you don't like hip-hop, you will still love this album if you like R&B music.

The album has several huge hits, including her fantastic cover of 'Can't Take My Eyes Off 'You is great! It's her most melodic hit, from the movie 1997 *Conspiracy Theory* with Mel Gibson. And when Lauryn Hill sings the chorus, she is – no doubt – all there: "I need you baby/If it's quite alright/I need you, baby." She sings this so fantastically and arguably better than the Frankie Valli original. 'Everything Is Everything', another great hit from the album, signifies her style throughout the whole album: start with the theme and beat, and then elaborate and amplify.

Besides the two hits above (and the four great love songs), I really love the track 'To Zion'. This is one of the best tracks on the album, with a fantastic snare drum beat, and Carlos Santana doing some great Spanish guitar picking. The song is about how Lauryn decides to give birth to her child Zion: "But everybody told me to be smart/'Look at your career' they said/'Lauryn, baby, use your head'/But instead I chose to use my heart."

While the lyrics are great and life affirming, the music on this track is fantastic. Lyrically Lauryn seems to give her all, vocally on this track. She belts all out, at the end of the track, perfectly fitting the track and the lyric – "Beautiful, beautiful Zion".

'Ex-Factor', the first of those great love songs, I mentioned earlier, has a great drop rhythm, background organ and single piano key tabs. Later the love song, 'When It Hurts So Bad' features excellent acoustic guitar strumming, that turns into great rhythm guitar in the second half of the track. The acoustic guitar accents her words in this melody perfectly "That what you want might make you cry/What you need might make pass you by/If you don't catch it/If you don't catch it."

On the next track – 'I Used To Love Him' – Lauryn Hill manages to somehow create a great R&B love song with a great intermittent hip-hop rhythm and her signature profound lyrics; "And out of the darkness arrived the sweet dawn/I used to love him but now I don't/I used to love him but now I don't."

For all the sad love songs and sombre warnings about how to behave, her fourth love song 'Sweetest Thing' is exactly that – the sweetest thing on the album. It's a song full of tenderness, optimistic and love and the only song where she "admits" the power of love over her life or anyone's life.

It's a shame that her self-imposed exile mean *Miseducation…* and 2002's *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0* form the bulk of her musical output. Worse, her subsequent run-ins with the Inland Revenue Service will forever be associated with Lauryn Hill's name. But they shouldn't overshadow this landmark album, where Lauryn Hill swings for the fences and succeeds, while managing to revitalize the great R&B promise that the 1970's had in abundance. A must-buy record for all lovers of R&B, hip-hop and soul music.

Michael Vámos

Bennett Wilson Poole

I Saw A Star Behind Your Eyes, Don't Let It Die Away ◗ BWP Records ◗ CD, vinyl, download

Recording ★★★★☆ Music ★★★★★

It's been five years since British trio Bennett Wilson Poole – Robin Bennett (Goldrush, Dreaming Spires), Danny Wilson (Grand Drive, Danny and the Champions of the World), and Tony Poole (Starry Eyed and Laughing) – hit the UK Americana scene like a hurricane with their brilliant, self-titled debut album.

The band picked up UK Artist of the Year at the 2019 UK Americana Awards – they collected their trophy in front of an audience that included Graham Nash himself – and soon established a loyal fanbase, as they became a live tour de force and a firm festival favourite.

Their first album was intended to be a one-off collaborative project, but Bennett and Wilson soon found themselves working on new material. Sadly, due to Covid restrictions and also Poole suffering from health issues, album number two was delayed, but the good news is that he is now fighting fit and the record is out this spring – and, what's more, it's even better than its predecessor.

It doesn't mess around. "Are you ready to rumble?" asks Wilson, before opening song, 'I Saw Love' kicks in – which is life-affirming and harmonic power pop, like The Byrds and The Beatles.

Poole, who as well as being a studio wizard – his inventive and playful production techniques transform Bennett and Wilson's songs into gloriously rich pocket symphonies – is also king of the jangly, electric 12-string Rickenbacker guitar, which features prominently in the band's sound, as does their superb vocal harmonies and arrangements.

Poole takes great delight in telling us that the ending of 'I Saw Love' features a sixth note harmony like The Beatles' 'She Loves You'. It's just one of many moments on the album that reference classic rock and pop songs – listeners will have fun trying to spot them all.

Anyone for a game of Bennett Wilson Poole bingo? I'll start you off – 'Tie-Dye T-Shirt' has an intro that pays homage to The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again' and features a vocal refrain of 'open up your eyes,' which echoes 'Everlasting Love' by '60s British pop band Love Affair.

"When Danny and Robin first laid down the basic voice and acoustic guitar track, they'd envisaged it as a Gram Parsons-type country song – little did they know," says Poole. "I'd already somehow been inspired to reference The Who, but I don't know where that came from – no special pills were involved."

Bennett Wilson Poole's first album was in love with the vintage sounds of America's West Coast, but this collection of songs owes more to British '60s psych-pop like The Beatles and The Zombies.

Ironically, though, 'I Wanna Love You (But I Can't Right Now)' is about having a love/hate relationship with the USA – how the country's dark political situation over the past few years has overshadowed all the great culture and art it has produced throughout history.

It's an irresistible and infectious song and one of the album's few country rock moments.

The other is the gorgeous and nostalgic 'Cry At The Movies'. Written about an old man who was born at the start of World War II and fell in love with the silver screen, it sounds like Neil Young teaming up with The Byrds circa *Sweetheart of the Rodeo.*

Album closer, the dream-like 'The Sea and The Shore', is a heartfelt and moving plea for unity, which started off with Bennett at his piano.

"I played everything else on it," explains Poole. "It was a bit like Jeff Lynne working on John Lennon's home recordings to create 'Free As A Bird' and 'Real Love'. Danny put some harmonies on the verses too."

He adds: "As a final reminder, I extended the last chord in the way that 'A Day In The Life' does. It just seemed that the song's sentiments should still be playing for ever, long after the record was over."

This is a fab album; all old-fashioned pop music, and classic rock 'n' roll. What's not to love about that?

Sean Hannam

The God in Hackney

The World in Air Quotes ◗ Junior Aspirin Records ◗ vinyl, download

Recording ★★★★☆ Music ★★★★★

The core members of The God in Hackney are Andy Cooke (guitars, vocals, piano, loops, samples), Dan Fox (guitars, bass, vocals, piano, synths, samples), Ashley Marlowe (drums, synthesizer, noise channels) and Nathaniel Mellors vocals, piano, bass guitar, synths, samples, FX). As a whole, The God in Hackney sound is difficult to pigeon hole and that's part of its appeal; this band has makes music like few others.

For this project, the group expanded their line-up to include multi-instrumentalists and composers Eve Essex and Kelly Pratt (Father John Misty, David Byrne/St Vincent). The God in Hackney are from Los Angeles, but the music they make is almost as English as it gets with deep roots in the avant garde and art rock worlds. Foreign culture is often more appealing than one's own and frequently encourages more thorough investigation, and that at least seems to be the case here.

They are excellent musicians and highly inventive composers with more than an eye on the way the music is shaped. *The World in Air Quotes* opens with 'In The Face of a New Science' which is lyrically the best song on the album, with lines like "No one told us our reasoning was becoming unreasonable" and some beautiful if sombre trumpet playing. Like many pieces on the album it builds both lyrically and musically to a restrained crescendo and them morphs down to an acoustic denouement. The songwriter clearly has a sense of dread but mixes it with subtle humour.

'Heaven & Black Water' is the most conventional song on the album, with a 4/4 beat and an 1980s influenced structure. Here the vocal has been given the autotune treatment, possibly in an attempt to broaden its appeal or maybe just for the sake of variety, I suspect that the latter is more likely. The guitar on 'Bardo!' could be Andy Summers, the lyrics have something of The Police's darkest moments about them too but the multiplication of voices and the introduction of caustic saxophone take it to a much heavier place. This piece gets intense and is a test of any system's timing, with clangy chords, mucho percussion and a mercifully abrupt finale.

'Interstate 5' is a standout piece with superb drum playing and kit sound that's occasionally manipulated but largely straight and true. Its joined by bass before a silent bridge after which the combo are joined by guitar and eventually keyboards. The final quarter could be John Wetton era King Crimson such is the ferocity of the bass sound. The other clear highlight is 'Broken Pets' where clean and distorted guitar are contrasted to good effect with a song that comes across like a British urban blues inasmuch as there is nothing in the arrangement to suggest the blues save for the nature of the lyrics. The piece is full of tension that's produced by a glitchy electronica and brass backing; this threatens to break open at any moment like a vast sinkhole appearing in a cul-de-sac.

Dark undercurrents circulate around all 11 songs on *The World in Air Quotes* yet the overall feel is not one of misery. The God in Hackney do their best to sound British and are very convincing yet clearly they don't have to endure the grimy reality of life in a down at heel if fashionable London suburb, nor the grey skies of winter. 'A Frozen Western' is the only song with American influences, primarily these are provided by a B-52s beat over discordant electric guitar, snappy snare drum and tremulous trumpet. It gets pretty chaotic but just about holds together, which makes it all the more rewarding.

The World in Air Quotes is a well-produced album with very appealing sound sculpting that's achieved by giving the voice and instruments their own distinct acoustic shapes. The way that some tracks are reinforced with deep bass is also very appealing, adding to the sense of layering and giving the sound real depth. Not for the faint of heart but not challenging either *The World in Air Quotes* should put The God in Hackney on the map, maybe even in Hackney.

Jason Kennedy

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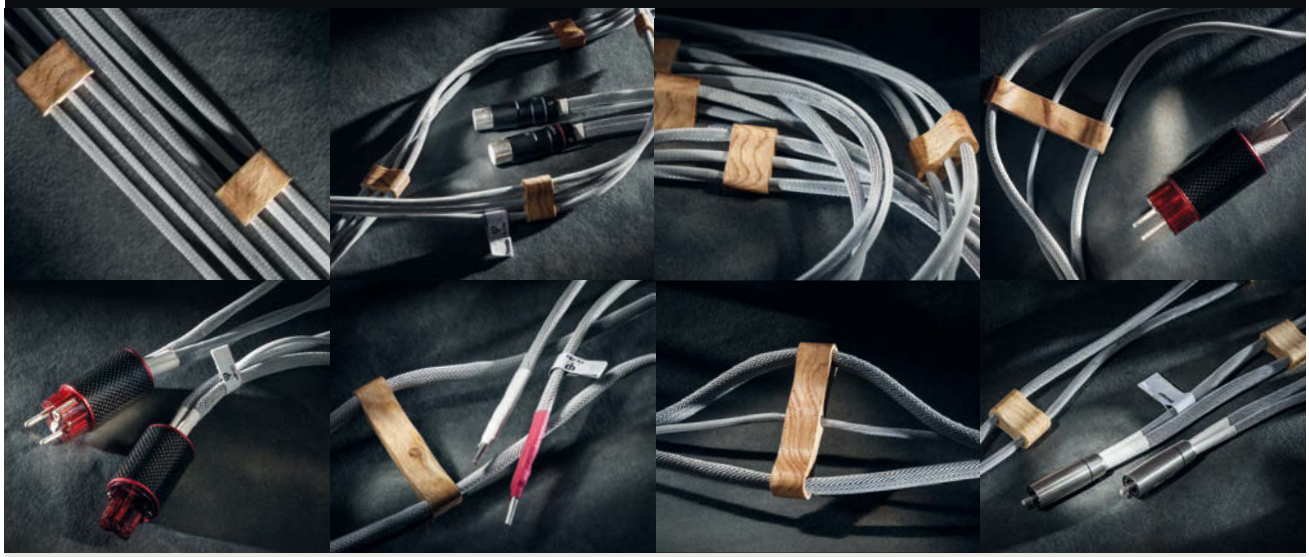

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Young Fathers

Heavy Heavy ◗ Ninja Tunes ZEN285 ◗ CD, vinyl 140g (reviewed), download, cassette

Recording ★★★½☆ Music ★★★★☆

Where do you go next when your debut album wins the prestigious Mercury Prize? Not that winning the Mercury first time of asking is a rarity, looking back through past winners it seems to almost be the norm with the likes of Franz Ferdinand, Artic Monkeys and Dave all winning with the first full-length releases, while last year's win for Little Simz's fourth album bucked this trend and was rather tardy by comparison. But still, the question remains: where do you go next when your debut album wins the prestigious Mercury Prize?

In the case of Young Fathers, the answer was to decamp from their native Edinburgh and move to Berlin, switch record labels and record the excellent, but less successful, *White Men Are Black Men Too*. The equally good *Cocoa Sugar* followed in 2018, and saw Young Fathers return to the top of some of the more cutting-edge 'album of the year' lists. It was also their biggest chart success in the UK.

That was five years ago; before the Pandemic. And now it is 2023. The trio may have switched labels a few times, but *Heavy Heavy* is their second outing on the legendary Ninja Tune, which is also the current home of the likes of Sampa The Great and Kae Tempest. It's a label that seems to suit Young Fathers and their eclectic style, which fuses elements of American Hip-Hop, electronic chicanery, and the noisier, more experimental end of the Pop spectrum.

Start listening to *Heavy Heavy* and before you know quite what's going on you are four tracks in. Not that the album starts slow, quite the opposite in fact, because the opener 'Rice' is an absolute banger and the following 'I Saw' has all the multi-layered swagger we've come to expect from Young Fathers over the last decade.

It speeds by because this is a Formula 1 race car of an album, and things are moving at a frenetic pace throughout. With 10 tacks spanning just 33 minutes, the three-piece have stuck to the tried-and-tested cliché of the three-minute pop song. Thankfully this is one of those clichés that exist because they are true – three minutes is the ideal length for a slice of pop music.

'Geronimo' and 'Shoot Me Down' slow proceedings down a little in the middle, both featuring rich bass lines and breathy vocals, before the fantastic 'Ululation' gets the party started again. But 'Holy Moly' is the stand-put track for me, the final moment of jubilation before the lower key ending of 'Be Your Lady'. It's dark, rapid-fire beat is the perfect partner for both the rather menacing vocal delivery on the verses and the more upbeat chorus.

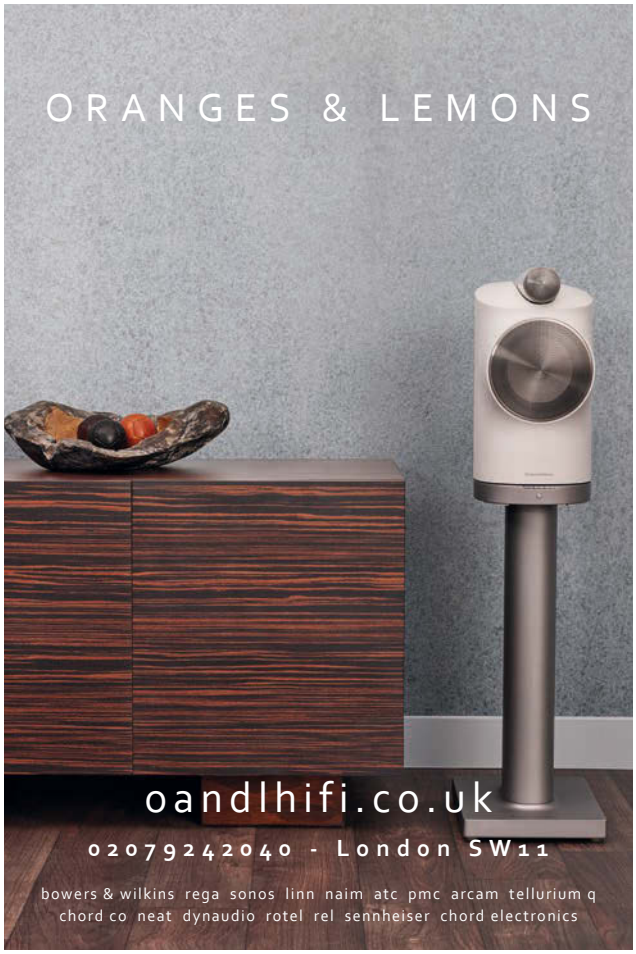
As you can tell, *Heavy Heavy* is an album full of light and shade, and one that we can imagine translating well to the band's raucous live shows, with plenty of singalong hooks and the kind of call-and-response moments that their audience will go mad for.

We'd go as far as saying that this is Young Father's best album yet. Perhaps the elongated gestation period did them a favour, allowing them to hone the tracks more precisely than previous offerings. Whatever the reason, we are thankful for it, and it bodes well for the future.

Finally, this is another album with multiple vinyl versions available out there – looking at Rough Trade revealed five different versions on LP! However, all of them are 140g vinyl, with only a change of colour between black and white marking any differences to the physical product – the other variations are to do with covers and fold-out posters. Personally, I would add a full-on 180g pressing in black vinyl. But perhaps I'm showing my age here, because as is often the way nowadays, there's also a cassette offering to sit alongside the LP and CD versions. It's ironic that the format that was pillaried by the music business for its negative impact on sales ("Home Taping Is Killing Music") is now the format of choice to avoid the endless and easy duplication of digital music files. Regardless of format though, *Heavy Heavy* is perfect for the truly hip.

Shaun Marin

ORANGES & LEMONS



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Mahler

Symphony No 5, Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Claudio Abbado ◗ Deutsche Grammophon
486 406-1 2LPs (437 789-2 CD and 477 571-2 SACD)

Recording ★★★☆☆ Music ★★★★★

When Deutsche Grammophon released Claudio Abbado's Berlin recording of Mahler's 5th symphony on CD in 1993, the notion that – in 30 or so years time – DG would issue it on LP would have seemed absurd; impossible; stark staring bonkers.

Abbado's Mahler 5 was one of DG's first 4D recordings. Taken from live performances given in the Berlin Philharmonie, it's a powerful refined account with smooth, open, natural sound, and an enormously-wide dynamic range. A to D converters were used close to the microphones in order to digitise signals as soon as possible.

The performance lasts a shade under 70m and for vinyl it's spread over four LP sides. Previous vinyl issues nearly always put Mahler 5 on three sides. This meant having the first two movements on side one, resulting in a fairly long playing time around the 27m to 29m mark.

Abbado takes a little over 27m for the first two movements, but with each on a single LP side there's no problem for the disc mastering engineer having to try and cut a long side while maintaining a fairly high volume level. However, cutting levels are not especially high. They might easily have been raised 3dB or more. I want to see nice deep squiggly grooves!

Fortunately, the surfaces on DG's new pressings are super-quiet. Vinyl roar and surface ticks and pops are very low, so you can increase volume levels and not hear any background noise. My pressings were very clean and quiet, though side three was a wee bit 'swishy' in places – hopefully a fault limited to my particular set.

Comparing Abbado's Mahler 5 LPs with Karajan's (released in 1975), the older set is cut at the same peak level but subjectively the sound has more immediacy and heft. That said Karajan's climaxes sometimes feel slightly compressed – perhaps due to analogue tape squash.

On my equipment, Abbado's smooth sweet-sounding recording has less immediacy than Karajan's, which is sharper and more-focused. Tonally, DG's best 4D recordings sounded very natural and open with no fake digital brightness or glare, but could sometimes sound almost too neutral.

It sounds like Abbado's Tonmeister Gernot von Schultzendorff used a simple microphone technique. The 4D process allowed time-delay, enabling close and distantly-placed microphones to integrate-better and create phase-coherent results. So perhaps that's why any spot-mics used are so discreet.

From a balance and perspective standpoint, there's no question that Abbado's Berlin Mahler 5 is much less 'stage managed' than many of DG's recordings from the previous 15 years or so. You sense the sound captured is just as it happened, live in the hall.

The Philharmonie in Berlin is an unusual hall, placing the orchestra in the centre of the auditorium rather than an enclosed space near a rear wall. Abbado's performance was recorded in front of an audience (with applause at the end), so this would have damped the sound somewhat.

Abbado's Mahler 5 is sumptuously played – sleek, powerful, trenchant, with exquisite detail. It's a refined sophisticated virtuoso rendition. Surprisingly, Karajan is less polished, but more passionate, throwing caution to the wind for the excitement of the moment. His Adagietto is to die for.

Both are superlative readings, and stand high among the best Mahler 5s. But does being on vinyl add anything extra to the Abbado/Berlin set over CD/SACD? I'm not sure it does. Abbado's vinyl sounds good, but the SACD showcases the original recording with far greater fidelity.

Abbado's vinyl doesn't quite give you that extra sense of holographic-dimensionality and spacious-richness that's there with DG's Kubelik and Karajan Mahler 5 LPs. It's good, but would have sounded much-more vivid if cutting levels had been a few dB higher...

Jimmy Hughes

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